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ABSTRACT

This comprehensive review of parent involvement examines more than 200 studies to identify what research says about attitudes toward parent involvement, how parent involvement is practiced, and how parent involvement affects student achievement. The review also identifies research-based applications educators can use to implement effective parent involvement practices, discusses how schools can involve special populations of parents, and describes common barriers to involving parents and what schools can do to remove those barriers. Chapter 1 gives a brief history of parent involvement and contends that educators need to know if research provides evidence that parent involvement is an effective educational practice. Chapter 2 presents research indicating that educators, parents, and children agree that parent involvement is important, but do not agree on specific aspects of parent involvement. Chapter 3 notes that there is a moderate, positive relationship between parent involvement and student achievement and that parents' expectations of their children's academic achievement have the strongest positive relationship with children's actual achievement level, a robust finding with implications for school-parent relationships. Chapter 4 describes characteristics of strong parent involvement programs, identifies major obstacles to such programs, and discusses the administrator's role in making changes in parent involvement practices. Chapter 5 discusses several ways teachers can provide mechanisms for parent involvement both at school and at home. Chapter 6 examines parent involvement in the context of special populations, barriers to effective parent involvement, cautions about practicing parent involvement, promises for parent involvement, and guidelines for practicing parent involvement. (Contains 207 references.) (KB)

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Chapter One

Introduction

The poor performance of American schools is now so well known that it makes the front page of the daily newspaper and is a source of public humiliation.

— John Murphy and Jeffry Schiller[1]

Public schools, for all their faults, remain one of our most stable and effective public institutions — indeed, given the increase in social pathologies in the society, educators have done far better in the last generation than might have been expected.

— David Tyack and Larry Cuban[2]

Educational reform has been a major concern in America for more than a century. Criticisms of public education became more strident after World War II and have not diminished since. Patricia Alexander, Karen Murphy, and Bradford Woods suggest that if we count the "number of innovations that have come and gone in the history of American education, the list would undoubtedly fill volumes."[3] Many educators have addressed the condition of American education, but opinions vary widely. Some believe it is on the verge of disaster, while others, such as David Berliner and Bruce Biddle, believe public schools have much to be proud of — especially considering the number of demands placed on them.[4] Regardless of one's position, most people agree that there is room for improvement.

Teachers, administrators, and other school personnel can make significant contributions to changes in the educational system only if they have the resources to do so. Educators want to be successful, but they often have insufficient resources to accomplish their goals. Gerald Bracey suggests that "whenever faced with a pressing social problem, the nation has turned to its schools for a solution while failing to provide sufficient resources to make the solution a genuine possibility."[5]

Recent education statistics released by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) indicate that America has, on average, the highest per student expenditure of any OECD country; however, such figures can be misleading.[6] For example, America has above-average nonteaching costs, such as building maintenance and cafeteria

services, but teacher salaries — measured as a percentage of the gross domestic product — rank 16th among the 20 nations reporting. Moreover, American teachers work about 140 more hours per year than other teachers in OECD member nations. Of the 11 nations that calculate student-teacher ratios, American schools have the fifth highest. In addition, American schools are being asked to take on an increasing number of responsibilities. Not only are schools expected to provide academic instruction to America's children, they also feed, socialize, counsel, supervise, and even baby-sit them. Schools are often called upon to provide public entertainment, information, adult education, and other services to the community. With increasingly tight budgets and greater demands on schools, alternative resources must be identified. One of these receiving increasing attention is parents.

Involving parents in schools has the potential to save money and time; it is also a critical ingredient for children's educational growth and success. Many people, including researchers, educators, and parents, believe that the division between the family and the school in past years has been harmful to both schools and children.[7] They believe it is time to get parents and families back into the educational picture.

While there is a growing body of literature on parent involvement in early childhood learning and education, this book concentrates on parent involvement from kindergarten through high school. Also, the involvement of parents of children with disabilities is supported by a large and rich body of literature, but this topic is beyond the scope of this book. The remainder of this chapter provides a brief history of parent and family involvement in education and explores why educators, parents, and government and business leaders want parents involved in education. Chapters two and three focus on research about parent involvement. More than 200 studies were examined to discover what research says about issues such as attitudes toward parent involvement, parent involvement practices, and the effect of parent involvement on student achievement. Chapters four and five identify research-based applications to help educators implement effective parent involvement practices. Chapter six discusses how to involve special populations of parents, identifies barriers to effective parent involvement, and suggests remedies. It also addresses some limitations of the research, pitfalls and promises of parent involvement, and directions for the future.

A Brief History of Parent Involvement

Our form of compulsory, public education has existed for a little less than 150 years. Prior to the 1850s, education was primarily a family responsibility. When public education became widespread in the late 1800s and early 1900s, its supporters argued that the central control characteristic of public schools would counteract the negative influence of the family.[8] This argument also played a role in the institutionalization of children with disabilities, where professionals believed separating children from their parents was the best answer.

As the American educational system became more bureaucratized, parents found themselves shut out of the educational process. Professionalizing the teaching field led to a common belief among educators and some parents that education should be left to the profes-

sionals, a belief that Joyce Epstein calls the theory of "separate spheres of influence."[9] Educators adhering to this theory may consider parents an impediment to education. Likewise, parents may consider themselves unqualified to contribute to their child's education.

Parents have shown concern for this separation between home and school since 1897, when a group of mothers formed the National Congress of Mothers, which was the basis for the Parent Teacher Association.[10] The current push to reinvolve the family in education began in the 1960s, when the War on Poverty called for more citizen involvement.[11] Programs for low-income children, such as Headstart and Follow Through, actively reached out to parents. The movement toward deinstitutionalization in the 1970s served as another stimulus for parent and family involvement in education.[12] For example, special education legislation required parent involvement in children's individual education programs. As dissatisfaction with public education grew in the 1970s and 1980s, more parents demanded involvement in their child's education. In fact, the desire for more involvement and control over children's schooling has been a primary catalyst for parents' increasing participation in home schooling as well as the recent interest in charter schools. Perhaps, more importantly, educators have become excited about parent involvement for two reasons: 1) school personnel see parent involvement as a resource to help supplement restricted budgets, and 2) educational research findings indicate that children may experience advantages when their parents are involved in their education.

Spheres of Influence

Joyce Epstein, known for her extensive research on family-school partnerships, observes the following: "In some schools there are still educators who say, 'If the family would just do its job, we could do our job.' And there are still families who say, 'I raised this child; now it is your job to educate her.' These words embody the theory of separate spheres of influence. Other educators say, 'I cannot do my job without the help of my students' families and the support of this community.' And some parents say, 'I really need to know what is happening in school in order to help my child.' These phrases embody the theory of overlapping spheres of influence."[13]

Why Parent Involvement?

In the 1990s parent involvement has received wide acceptance as a benefit to education. Numerous advantages are attributed to the involvement of parents in their children's schooling, including increased student achievement, parent empowerment, improved attendance, and lower dropout rates.[14] Joyce Epstein, for example, notes that "the research suggests that students at all levels do better academic work and have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors if they have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved."[15] The United States Congress considered partnerships between families and schools to be so important that they included it as a goal in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. A recent publication by the United States Department of Education suggests several reasons for getting the family more involved in education, including the following:

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- *Involving families could double the public investment in student learning.* If every parent of a child aged one through nine spent one hour reading or working on school work with his or her child five days a week, American parents would annually devote at least 8.7 billion hours to support their children's reading.
- *Involving families is one of the best long-term investments a family can make.* The difference in lifetime earnings between a high school graduate and a nongraduate is more than $200,000. The difference in lifetime earnings between a college graduate with a bachelor's degree or a higher degree and a nongraduate is almost $1 million.
- *Greater family involvement in education is supported by parents, teachers, students, and business executives.* Forty percent of parents nationwide believe that they are not devoting enough time to their children's education. Teachers rank strengthening parents' roles in their children's learning as the issue that should receive the highest priority in public education policy over the next few years. Among 10- to 13-year-olds, 72% say they would like to talk to their parents more about school work; 48% of older adolescents (14- to 17-year-olds) agree. Eighty-nine percent of company executives identify the biggest obstacle to school reform as lack of parental involvement.[16]

Researcher Claire Smrekar notes that because "schools are democratic institutions, they should promote sustained parent participation in the decisions which impact the lives of children and their families."[17] Annette Lareau and Charles Benson believe parents and other interested adults should make additional contributions to the schools above and beyond those of the general taxpayer, because families see personal benefits to their children, thus making parents more indebted to schools.[18] (It can be argued that whenever any child benefits from education, society as a whole benefits; thus, everyone is equally indebted to the schools.)

Some authors suggest that improvements in public education can happen only when there are improvements in society. And they believe many of those improvements start at home. In his book *Greater Expectations*, William Damon suggests that the manner in which we raise our young contributes greatly to the problems we face in society

In Support of Parent Involvement in Education

When I went into the grocery store with my mother and father in the 1940s, it was a rare day that we did not encounter someone from my elementary school æ the custodian, the principal, the secretary, or a teacher. There would always be an exchange of pleasantries and sometimes an exchange about my school behavior or achievement. The knowledge that my parents knew and appeared to like and respect the people at my school had a profound impact on my behavior. The authority my parents held by virtue of the care and guidance they gave me was transferred directly to the people who ran the school. My parents were physically present at school only on visiting days and other special occasions. But their involvement with the school, though indirect, was meaningful and constant.[19]

—James P. Comer

and education.[20] Laurence Steinberg submits that the uproar about school reform might be better resolved if we ask different questions.[21] He believes that the question should not be, Do schools make a difference? or How much difference do they make? but rather, What conditions need to be in place so that schools can make a difference? Parent involvement in education is one condition that parents, educators, and researchers are taking seriously.

What Is Parent Involvement?

Joan L. Herman and Jennie P. Yeh note that "[t]he conception of the role that parents should play in public education has undergone a dramatic shift in the last decade. In the not-too-distant past, the parents' role in public schools consisted mainly of (1) dropping their children off at the door of the school, and (2) voting for bond issues."[22] Indeed, many educators and parents do not understand the breadth of possibilities for parent involvement in education. Until recently, parent involvement meant attending parent-teacher conferences and supporting extracurricular activities. According to Joyce Epstein, parent involvement in education should include the following activities:

- parenting — parents providing a home environment that supports education;
- communicating — schools communicating with parents and parents communicating with schools;
- supporting — parents participating, supporting, and attending school events;
- volunteering — parents participating as school volunteers and aides;
- at-home learning — parents creating and carrying out educational activities at home;
- leading — parents participating in leadership roles and school governance; and
- collaborating — schools collaborating with the community for the benefit of schools and families.[23]

Other researchers place parent involvement activities in one of two categories: those based at school and those based at home. Critics express concern that educators often focus on the former and neglect the latter.[24] In fact, educators need to recognize all the ways that parents might be involved in their children's education.

Why We Need to Know What the Research Says

Fads and False Promises. Educators have a reputation for embracing practices and innovations that are untested and unproven.[25] Some researchers have accused educators of ignoring or even rejecting practices that have strong empirical support. J. E. Stone suggests that educators may reject proven educational practices on philosophical grounds.[26] For example, educators may support teaching methods that reflect a developmental or child-centered philosophy, even when there is strong empirical support for a more teacher-centered approach. In fact, the "teacher-centered" versus "child-centered" argument is a recurrent reform theme. Larry Cuban suggests that recurrent, constant reform may reflect continual values conflicts.[27]

Alternatively, Patricia Alexander and her colleagues suggest that educational innovations are constantly changing because educators tend to focus on the familiar — that which is easier to communicate and that which is easier to control — and have limited knowledge about educational innovations.[28] Lack of knowledge or too little knowledge may be one reason for the widely recognized gap between research and practice when it comes to parent involvement. Certainly there is a lack of teacher training on parent involvement practices in education.[29] Teachers want parent involvement but may not have the knowledge to implement effective parent involvement practices.

Other Research-into-Practice Issues. A number of arguments have been advanced for the importance of knowing educational research and tying research results to practice. Patricia Alexander and her colleagues suggest that knowing educational research may help educators avoid the pitfall of "recycling . . . old movements under new labels."[30] Familiarity with educational research helps educators base their own practices on proven, effective practices rather than wasting time on ineffective ones. Cecille Johnson suggests three important advantages of research-based teaching: "Research findings can define, defend, and direct your teaching decisions."[31]

Involving parents in education makes intuitive sense, but educators need to know if research provides evidence that parent involvement is, in reality, an effective educational practice. For example, what types of parent involvement might produce positive outcomes? Ursula Casanova has suggested that there may be types of parent involvement that have negative consequences for schools, children, and parents.[32] Patricia Alexander and her colleagues suggest that in contemplating educational practices, we should "strive to determine what aspects of each have merit or value and the conditions under which that value is best utilized."[33] By examining the research on parent involvement in education, aspects of parent involvement can be identified that have merit and can be influenced by school personnel.

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Chapter Two

Insights from the Research: Attitudes and Practices

People regulate their level and distribution of effort in accordance with the effects they expect their actions to have. As a result, their behavior is better predicted from their beliefs than from the actual consequences of their actions.

— Albert Bandura[1]

The importance of knowing about the results of educational research and tying results to practice was noted in the first chapter. But having such knowledge does not mean it will be applied. One reason is that educators' attitudes toward classroom practices may conflict with what research findings tell them they should be doing. In a review of research on the relationship between attitudes and behavior, Daniel Canary and David Siebold found that specific measures of attitude can predict specific behaviors.[2] Fortunately, there is a body of research concerning the attitudes of educators, parents, and students toward parent involvement. These findings provide valuable insights into both parents' and teachers' parent involvement practices and students' reactions to them.

Educators' Attitudes and Practices

What Educators Think about Parent Involvement. Survey results spanning more than a decade show that teachers and administrators support parents' involvement in education. For example, a nationwide poll conducted in 1981 found that more than 90% of teachers at every grade level wanted more interaction between the school and the home.[3] In a 1986 reader survey for *Instructor* magazine, "more parent involvement" was the most frequent response to the question, What is most important for improving student achievement?[4] Lack of support from parents was the biggest problem most frequently mentioned by teachers in 1984, 1989, and 1996 national surveys.[5] Inner-city elementary and middle school teachers had strong positive attitudes about parent involvement in a study conducted by the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools at Johns Hopkins University.[6] Nearly all undergraduate education majors (99%) participating in a 1992 survey indicated that parent

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A First-Grade Teacher's Perspective

Having parents involved both in and outside the classroom is an asset. I teach 24 first-graders, and I can tell first hand that direct parent involvement really makes a difference in a child's academic performance. For instance, I have one student whose parents clearly do not take the time or put forth the effort to do his reading homework with him at night. It is clear that his reading ability has been affected, because what I do at school is not reinforced at home. This puts him at a disadvantage in reading, because the rest of his peers have been reinforced [at home]. It is very noticeable in the classroom when my students don't have parental support at home. When parents [visit] the classroom, the students of those parents become more excited and want to show off their reading, math, or whatever they have been doing. Because they want to please, they try even harder to do their best. This can't help but affect them academically. Having parent involvement in my classroom is critical to the overall success of my students.[8]

involvement is necessary for optimal student growth.[7]

Teachers and parents sometimes disagree about certain aspects of parent involvement. For example, teachers surveyed in one community believed parents there did not strongly support parent involvement.[9] However, a survey of parents in the same community contradicted these beliefs. (Interestingly, most teachers viewed their own support of parent involvement as stronger than their colleagues'.) In separate national surveys, teachers and public school parents were asked whose side they thought parents would take if a teacher told them their child was misbehaving or disrupting the class.[10] The teachers and parents disagreed about how much support teachers can expect from parents. If a child were misbehaving or disrupting the class, 41% of teachers said parents would back the teacher, but 57% of public school parents said they would do so. Twice as many teachers (50%) as parents (25%) said parents would take their child's side.

Teachers' attitudes indicate they may have misperceptions about why some parents are not more involved in their children's education. Nearly 50% of junior high school teachers surveyed in the District of Columbia attributed barriers to home-school collaboration to parents.[11] Some said parents' apathy and lack of interest are the primary obstacles. But research suggests that other factors, such as cultural misunderstandings, school bureaucracy, time, and health, may contribute to low parent involvement.[12] (In the District of Columbia survey, teachers with more experience tended to describe barriers in a reciprocal way, for example, "[I]t's a two-way communication problem."[13])

Laurie Leitch and Sandra S. Tangri found that some teachers believe parents' work schedules are a major obstacle to parent involvement.[14] Parents themselves suggest that work makes it difficult for them to participate in school activities. However, "31% of those [parents who were] employed said they kept in touch with their child's teachers by coming to school, compared to 23% of those who were not employed."[15]

Because of their attitudes toward parents, teachers may preclude home-based parent involvement activities, which some researchers say have the greatest impact on the achievement of students from low-income homes. Joyce Epstein and Henry Becker found that about

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50% of the teachers they surveyed doubted the success of efforts to involve parents in at-home learning activities.[16] Many teachers voiced concerns about students and parents having enough time to participate in at-home learning activities.

In another survey, 39% of teachers believed that parents are not qualified to help students at the high school level, and 31% believed it is not reasonable to expect parents to spend very much time on at-home educational activities.[17] About 30% of teachers rejected the idea of informal learning activities at home because they believed parents are uncooperative or they thought such activities would be too difficult for parents to implement.[18] But 40% of families of students attending inner-city middle schools were involved every week in at-home activities that were part of a language arts program, and 23% were involved every other week. More than 80% of the families liked the interactive homework program, and 90% advised the schools to continue the program the following year.

Teachers and administrators support some forms of parent involvement, such as tutoring or homework assistance, but they are not enthusiastic about involving parents in curriculum development, instruction, or school governance.[19] In one survey, a majority of administrators (76%) thought parents did not have enough training to make school decisions.[20] On the other hand, a plurality of parents (66%) in this same survey felt parents *were* qualified to make school decisions.

In a national teachers' survey, 50% believed parents have adequate involvement in decisions about the allocation of school funds, the curriculum, and the selection of books and instructional materials, and more than 40% believed parents have enough say about hiring teachers and administrators and setting their salaries.[21] But when the public was asked the same question, more than 50% said parents should have more say about school fund allocations and the curriculum, and more than 40% said parents should have more say about selecting and hiring teachers and administrators. David Ost notes, "[S]tudies indicate that the majority of teachers and principals see the ideal relationship with parents as one in which parents support teacher practices and school in general [and] carry out requests but do not interfere with plans and decisions."[22]

Some elementary teachers suggest that parents' time might best be spent teaching children responsibility and general social skills.[23] Other teachers say parents of elementary students should read with and to children.[24] In a study by Donna Brian, teachers suggested ways they would like to see parents of secondary students get involved:

- Be there for children and support their activities.
- Show strong support for academics by encouraging children to do better.
- Encourage children to respect authority, particularly the teacher's.[25]

Administrators in this same study agreed with teachers that parents of students in secondary schools should support their children and encourage them to get involved and to study hard. Administrators felt that parents' help was no longer needed in the classroom, at least in a supervisory role, but that parents in the classroom could provide additional opportunities for adult interaction with students.

A Change in Attitude

A teacher relates how her attitude toward parents changed when she made a home visit to a parent of one of her students:

I began to understand how societal pressures were intertwined with the mission of the school. Educators must be sensitive to these variables and refrain from quick decisions. I had adopted the stereotype that Blacks living in ghetto areas did not care about schooling. The stereotypes I had acquired contributed to my ineffectiveness as a teacher. I chose the indulgent belief that the problem was in the student and I had done all I could do.

This experience [the home visit] helped me develop a multidimensional understanding of the achievement concerns facing Black American parents. For many poor Black parents, education is crucial because there is more at stake than grades. . . . Jimmy's mother wanted him to do well, but she felt the school represented a hostile institution. It was important to open lines of communication with her so she felt ownership in the educational process.[26]

What Educators Do about Parent Involvement. Research about parent involvement practices has focused primarily on the elementary grades. Joyce Epstein and Susan Dauber found that elementary school parent involvement programs are stronger, more positive, and more comprehensive than those in the middle schools.[27] Other studies confirm that teachers' parent involvement practices are relatively stable through the elementary school years.[28] However, such practices are neither widespread nor frequent.

As children progress through middle and high school, the level of parent involvement decreases.[29] One study indicates that 74% of parents were highly or moderately involved in their child's education at the elementary school level.[30] This percentage dropped to 57% at the junior high school level and 50% at the high school level. In a study of high school teachers, at least 60% reported little or no contact with parents, and only 15% reported contact with most or all parents.[31] Secondary school teachers typically communicate with parents only when students are in trouble, indicating a dearth of positive communication between the school and home, which may contribute to the drop in parents' involvement.[32]

Results from several studies indicate that most teachers' parent involvement practices are infrequent and superficial.[33] Robert Roeser's longitudinal study of patterns of parent involvement documents teachers' infrequent use of methods to engage parents.[34] In particular, teachers reported rarely asking parents to participate in at-home educational activities. The most common strategy employed by teachers was to communicate basic classroom information. Parents in this study corroborated the teachers' reports of infrequent parent involvement practices, but they also reported receiving less communication than teachers reported sending.

In Joyce Epstein and Henry Becker's survey mentioned earlier, 40% of the teachers supported at-home learning activities but did not practice them, while 30% supported and used these methods. Interestingly, teachers of some academic subjects, such as English and reading, said they used parent involvement practices more than teachers of math, science, and social studies.

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How Educators Benefit from Parent Involvement. Research findings have identified benefits for teachers from active parent involvement. Teachers who *do* involve parents have more positive attitudes toward teaching, and parents' evaluations of teachers improve when teachers involve parents.[35] A large-scale study of elementary students, parents, and teachers found that teachers who frequently involved parents "did not prejudge less educated, poor, or single parents."[36] In addition, "they rated all groups of parents higher on helpfulness and follow-through on learning activities with their children at home." In contrast, teachers who did not involve parents frequently made more stereotypic judgments about the involvement and abilities of parents who were less educated, parents who were economically disadvantaged, and single parents. Finally, one study found that the public expressed feelings of confidence in the schools where there was strong parent and community involvement.[37]

Since most educators say parent involvement is a good idea, there appears to be a discrepancy between attitudes and practice. Teachers' infrequent use of parent involvement strategies may be due to a lack of knowledge about and inadequate training in specific approaches. Joyce Epstein and Henry Becker found that many teachers in their survey believed parent involvement in educational activities at home could be beneficial, but they were unsure how to initiate such practices.[38]

Another reason for teachers' infrequent use of methods to involve parents may be the limits on their time. Sanford Dornbusch and Philip Ritter found that teachers prefer more contact with parents of "difficult" students but do not want additional contact with parents of average- or high-achieving students.[39] In fact, routine home-school interaction is much more likely to be initiated by the parents of high-achieving students than by the students' teachers. Thus, many teachers probably believe that what little time they can afford to spend on parent involvement is best spent engaging parents of children who cause the most difficulty.

Parents' Attitudes and Practices

What Parents Think about Parent Involvement. Just as educators' attitudes toward parent involvement and parents can impact their practices, so too can parents' attitudes toward parent involvement and school affect the extent of their involvement. Opinion polls conducted over the years by Phi Delta Kappa and the Gallup Organization and the National Parent Teacher Association indicate that the public recognizes the importance of parents taking an active role in their children's education.[40] In her study, Linda Ginn notes, "Parents believed that they were the most stable and continuous force in the lives of their children and that involvement in the schools provided a means for the child to experience a continuous flow through the day, week, and year."[41]

Research findings suggest that parents may become more involved in their child's learning when they believe they can influence their child's success.[42] A study by Carol Ames and her colleagues found a positive relationship between parents' perceptions of their children's degree of motivation and their own school involvement.[43] That is, parents who saw their children as being capable and motivated to learn were more likely to become involved.

While Ames suggests that this finding may appear counterintuitive, that is, we would expect parents to become more involved if their children lacked motivation, it may be that parents are more likely to become involved when they are hopeful that they can make a difference.

Parents are also much more likely to become involved when they feel comfortable at their child's school.[44] Several studies have found that minority parents, in particular, feel uncomfortable or out of place at school.[45] One study found that parents' reports of comfort with school were significantly impacted by frequent and effective school-to-home communication.[46] In addition, parents' reported level of involvement was higher when they received frequent, effective communication. This same study found that school-to-home communication had the strongest positive effect on parents who have less formal education. This is encouraging, since this group has been identified as being less involved.

A Mother's Expression of Belief in Parent Involvement

> I've said to teachers, "You have my child for one year. This child I'll have until the day I die and if there's such a thing as an afterlife, I'll have them there, too." This is my child and there are things about my child that I know that you don't, simply because I've known my child longer than you have. . . . But, most importantly, when my child leaves your classroom and moves on to someone else, she's still my child. You have some feelings about her and some connections to her . . . but she's still mine and that's the name of the game. I'm the consistent part of this child's life — I'm the one.[47]

What Parents Do about Parent Involvement. While parents from all backgrounds support parent involvement in the schools at all grade levels, they show marked differences in their degree of participation.[48] For instance,

- white parents participate more than black parents;[49]
- parents of students attending schools with a higher socioeconomic status (SES) participate more than parents of students attending schools with a lower SES;[50]
- participation in school programs is highest for families that include both natural parents;[51]
- the proportion of single and married parents with low participation is about equal;[52]
- more married parents than single parents have high participation;[53]
- highly involved families are more likely to have six or more family members (including extended family members);[54]
- parents of children in rural schools participate more than parents of children in urban schools;[55] and
- parents who have lived longer in a school district participate more than recent arrivals.[56]

A recent longitudinal study of 12,000 students and 500 parents found that only about 20% of the parents consistently attended school programs, while more than 40% *never* attended school programs.[57] Only one-third of the parents in this sample attended their child's

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extracurricular performances. Other studies have found similar low levels of parent involvement in all areas.

Parents identify several barriers to parent involvement, including health problems, work responsibilities, time constraints, and personal discomfort or disillusionment with the school system. In spite of these obstacles, most parents agree that they would like to do more at school.[58] The main reason parents give for being less involved in middle school and high school is lack of encouragement from the schools.[59] In particular, parents report less frequent teacher communication and fewer requests for help.[60] Teachers, on the other hand, tend to blame parents for their low levels of participation.[61]

A study that examined parent involvement practices found that, when parents *are* involved in schools, they are involved in many different ways.[62] Volunteering in the school, helping with homework, and communicating through meetings or phone calls were among the activities parents named. Some were actively involved in the local Parent Teacher Association. Parents also said they became involved with the schools when they felt they needed to advocate for their child. They said it is the teacher's role to help all children, but it is the parents' responsibility to speak on behalf of their child. One activity that seemed to involve many parents was attending school programs in which their children performed. Most parents, even those who were not involved in other ways, made concerted efforts to do so.

How Parents Practice Educational Involvement

I work in the classroom. . . . I work in the library two days a week and here one day a week. I cover in the office when they need somebody.

I prefer not to honestly work with the children directly when I can help it. I don't mind photocopying and I kind of avoid class mother and field trips.

I volunteer when I can and I like the class trips. And I've been in the class to read them stories . . .

I periodically will call them or they will call me because I'm a very active mother and we need to communicate. I think my first [job] is to make sure that all teachers know I want them to communicate with me . . . so we have letters back and forth and phone calls.[63]

Low Parent Participation Rate at School

A study of 1,269 parents of elementary school children conducted by the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University found that:

- about 70% of the parents never helped the teacher in the classroom or on class trips;
- about 70% never participated in the administration of fund-raising activities for the school; and
- about 88% never assisted in the library, cafeteria, or other school areas.

The average number of days per year that parents were involved at school were:

- 4.1 days helping the teacher and class;
- 7 days helping with fund-raising activities; and
- 3.5 days helping in the school cafeteria, offices, library.

Only about 4% spent more than 25 days per year at the school or on school business.[64]

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How Parents Benefit from Parent Involvement. Research conducted by the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University suggests several benefits for parents who participate in their children's education — particularly activities at home:

- Parents who are involved in their children's education feel more connected to the school.
- Involved parents are more likely to evaluate teachers more highly.
- When parents are involved at school, teachers feel more comfortable asking them to participate with their children in at-home activities.[65]

Linda Ginn's case study of parent involvement practices found that "the more the parents were involved, the more understanding they were of the school program and of the teacher's role. . . . [P]arents were willing to invest a great deal of themselves in the program."[66] Thus, both teachers and parents experience benefits from these forms of parent involvement activities.

As is true for teachers, there is a substantial discrepancy between parents' beliefs and their practices. After interviewing parents and teachers, Laurie Leitch and Sandra Tangri concluded, "[It is] the lack of knowledge about how each can use the other person more effectively that is a major barrier."[67] A review of research by Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler confirms this conclusion.[68]

Robert Roeser's study suggests school-initiated efforts to involve parents are seriously lacking.[69] Despite this, parents in his sample reported that they stayed involved in their elementary children's education by reading with them and engaging in relevant discussions. Many studies have found that, overall, parents want to be more involved than they are.[70] Parents believe teachers could do much more to involve them. In fact, many studies indicate that the degree of parent involvement is primarily a function of how much schools reach out to parents.[71] Most parents who want to be involved have little idea of how to be involved effectively; thus, the burden is on the school to initiate parent involvement activities.

Students' Attitudes and Practices

What Students Think about Parent Involvement. Researchers have not investigated extensively students' attitudes about parent involvement, but the National Commission on Children found that most students at all grade levels want to talk to their parents more about schoolwork.[72] John Stallworth and David Williams found that teachers and parents believe students in secondary schools do not want their parents involved in their school experience.[73] However, Donna Brian found that teens in her sample unanimously believed that parents should be involved in their education.[74]

What Students Want from Parents. Few researchers have examined students' opinions about which parent involvement practices are important to them. In a study of high school parents, teachers, and students, 82% of students said they believed parents should be involved in their children's education; 54% felt that students should be included in parent-

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teacher conferences; and 40% believed that a volunteer program should be started or improved at their school.[75] But nearly 40% of the students did not want to invite their parents to become volunteers, and 55% did not want their parents to go on class trips. Educational activities at home drew much more support from these high school students. At least 75% supported the following practices:

- Show parents something students have learned or done well.
- Ask parents for ideas.
- Talk to parents about current events.
- Work with parents to keep up or improve grades.
- Ask parents to help study for tests.
- Bring home communication from class.

Teenagers in one study thought that parents can help by stressing the importance of education.[76] They also suggested that parents can help by "being there for me." In addition, they emphasized the importance of communication between children and parents as a form of parent involvement.

What Teenagers Want

In *Beyond the Classroom*, Laurence Steinberg discusses the importance of parent involvement to teenagers:

Not long ago, I served as a consultant to a national organization that sponsored a contest in which teenagers were invited to produce their own public service television announcements. The announcements, which were to be in the form of thirty- or sixty-second spots, could deal with any subject that the teenager felt deserved widespread public broadcast, including such topics as drug or sex education, AIDS awareness, conflict management, the importance of staying in school, and so forth. The contest winners would have their announcements broadcast on television.

Hundreds of entries were submitted, from all over the United States. What was the most popular theme? By a wide margin, the most popular message in these spots written and produced by teenagers was one aimed not at their peers, but at parents. The message was devastatingly sad in its simplicity; the adolescents used the public service announcements to remind parents to take time to talk to their teenagers.[77]

How Students Benefit from Parent Involvement. Just as Joyce Epstein found that teachers and parents disagree about how much parents are involved, Carole Ames found that children and parents disagree about how much parents are involved.[78] Ames suggests that children's perceptions about their parents' level of involvement may depend on whether they see this involvement as beneficial. More research is needed at all grade levels to determine what types of parent involvement children see as beneficial.

Parent involvement generally benefits parents and teachers through improved attitudes toward each other, toward the school, and toward the students. Children, too, benefit in more positive attitudes toward learning, school, and homework.[79] Some research suggests that children are more likely to have positive changes in attitudes toward education and improved

behavior when parents are involved in their educational experiences.[80] To support this theory, in a survey on violence, 50% of the students with below-average grades reported that their parents spent little or no time with them on schoolwork.[81] In a project conducted by James Comer, students showed substantial improvement in behavior problems, attitude toward school, and attendance over a five-year period when the organization of the school was restructured, including the addition of a parent participation program.[82] Researchers also report fewer discipline problems, improved student attendance, increased motivation, and increases in achievement.[83] The next chapter explores this last benefit.

Summary

Research indicates that educators, parents, and children all agree that parent involvement is important. However, there are discrepancies between teachers' and parents' attitudes and their practices. For example, the actual level of participation on the part of both parents and educators is low. Greater parent involvement is found among parents at higher SES levels; more involvement is needed among parents at lower SES levels. Both educators and parents are unsure how to practice parent involvement.

Furthermore, educators, parents, and students do not always agree on some specific aspects of parent involvement, for example, how much parents want to be involved; how much educators want parents to be involved; barriers to parent involvement; and if and how much parents should be involved at the middle and high school levels.

Studies indicate that effective communication is a critical parent involvement strategy. In addition, schools need to reach out to parents and help them feel comfortable being involved in their child's education. For parents to be committed to involvement, they need to feel like they can make a difference in their children's education. When effective parent involvement programs are in place, educators, parents, and students can benefit in social and emotional ways.

Researchers have found that middle-income parents participate more than low-income parents in their children's education. Claire Smrekar suggests that the schools may be able to ameliorate this discrepancy.[84] She found that schools that promoted a sense of community had better parent participation at all socioeconomic levels. Research conducted by the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Johns Hopkins University supports the idea that schools, not parents, are the key ingredient in successful parent involvement programs.[85] John H. Hollifield suggests that the "involvement of parents depends more on how schools seek to involve parents than on the status of the parents."[86]

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Chapter Three

Insights from the Research: Student Achievement

If we are convinced that a good education is necessary for all who live in modern society, then we must search for the alterable variables which can make a difference in the learning of children. . . . Our basic research task is to understand further how such alterable variables can be altered and their consequent effect on students, teachers, and learning.

— Benjamin Bloom[1]

While it *is* possible to alter or change some variables that affect students' learning, as Benjamin Bloom advises, it is *not* possible to change others. For example, it is possible to influence if and how much parents are involved in their children's education, but changing a parent's educational background or income level is beyond the realm of a school's influence. This somewhat obvious distinction is important for two reasons: 1) the extent to which parents become involved in their children's education is an alterable variable, and 2) children's academic achievement appears to be more strongly and positively related to parents' level of involvement than to parents' level of education or income.[2] Even though many of the problems that appear in our public schools are rooted in economically disadvantaged homes, there is good reason to investigate the relationship between parent involvement and student achievement and the effectiveness of particular strategies. Because specific parent involvement strategies may work better with some parents and children than with others, it is important to understand how parent and child characteristics may play a role in these issues, especially as they relate to the following three questions:

- To what extent is parent involvement related to achievement?
- What kinds of parent involvement have the strongest relationship with student achievement?
- Do some forms of parent involvement work better with particular parents and children?

Selected Research Studies

To explore the relationships between different aspects of parent involvement and student achievement, we reviewed more than 50 research articles. We tried to select articles describing well-designed studies, where student achievement was measured quantitatively, for example, using students' scores on standardized tests in reading, mathematics, etc. Parent involvement, as described in chapter one, is multidimensional, ranging from parents directly helping with homework to parents establishing high expectations for their children's school performance. This definition is commonly used in the studies we reviewed.

After completing the review, we concluded that many of the researchers overinterpreted their findings. In many cases, researchers gave statistical significance undue importance, or researchers implied cause-and-effect relationships from correlational findings. Thus, our interpretation of some of the results may be more cautious.

For the most part, our literature review includes research results from studies incorporating correlational, experimental, and quasi-experimental research designs. To help interpret and corroborate findings, we also examined several other literature reviews and qualitative studies.

Correlational Studies. In a number of correlational studies examining relationships between parent involvement and student achievement, researchers have examined data from the National Education Longitudinal Data of 1988 (NELS-88), a large data set compiled from school records and questionnaires completed by teachers, students, and parents and generally considered to be representative of students nationwide. In one of these studies, Kusam Singh and her colleagues examined data from 21,835 eighth-graders, concluding that the "... strongest influence on achievement was that of previous achievement."[4] That is, students who have succeeded academically in the past will

"Significant" as Important

Experimental researchers often use inferential statistics and report that their results are or are not "statistically significant." If a finding is statistically significant, the researcher is saying that results as large as those that were found (e.g., group differences in reading scores) rarely happen by chance. Statistical significance provides some information about the probability of chance occurrences with particular sample sizes (number of study participants), but it does not provide information about the importance of the results. This distinction is crucial, because many researchers appear to equate statistical significance with importance.

Other statistics, such as effect sizes, are independent of sample size and provide information about the importance or *educational* significance of a study's result. Effect sizes are important, because they can be compared across studies, allowing comparisons between group differences and relationships between sets of scores from different studies. Standardized mean difference (SMD) is an example of an effect size, as is a correlation coefficient. Effect sizes can be used to help determine the educational or practical significance of research results. In this chapter, when we refer to "significant," we are referring to both educational and statistical significance.[3]

tend to do so in the future. This finding is not surprising, but it is useful in helping parents and teachers determine the extent to which extra help is needed. Singh and her colleagues also found that parents' expectations of their child's success are strongly correlated with student achievement. Additionally, they concluded that parents have higher aspirations for their children when their children have succeeded academically in the past, and that parents who regularly communicate with school have higher aspirations for their children's school success. In summary, Kusum Singh and her colleagues note, "Parental involvement defined as educational aspirations exerted a powerful influence on achievement."[5] They recommend helping parents develop practical methods to convey higher aspirations to their middle school students.

Timothy Keith and his colleagues also examined the NELS-88 data from eighth-grade students and found a strong, positive correlation between parent involvement and the amount of homework completed.[6] They reported that " . . . parents who are more involved influence their children to do more homework (including at-home reading), and that homework, in turn, improves student achievement."[7] They also found that students' previous achievement is positively and strongly correlated with parent involvement, implying that parents of high achievers are more involved and more involvement increases achievement. Keith and his colleagues also noted that " . . . parents do want to become involved in order to help their children achieve, but they need assistance and guidance in order to do so."[8] As was the case in Kusum Singh's study, the strong relationship between students' previous achievement and parents' level of involvement further implies that parents of low achievers may need more encouragement, help, and guidance to get involved than do parents of high achievers.

Patrica Keith and Marilyn Lichtman repeated Timothy Keith's study, but they examined data from eighth-grade Mexican-American students.[9] They found a moderate, positive

Cause and Effect

Exploring and determining cause-and-effect relationships is the goal of most research. Researchers will readily admit, however, that a cause-and-effect relationship is never established by the results of a single study, particularly in educational research. Isolating causative variables is difficult when humans are the subject of study and the study is not conducted in a controlled environment.

Evidence for cause-and-effect relationships is built most conclusively through experimentation and replication; that is, when experimental studies are repeated by other researchers and similar results emerge. Unfortunately, replications rarely occur in educational research. Another approach is to review the literature in a specific area, select quality studies, consolidate and integrate study findings, and then, through a strategy called *triangulation*, attempt to determine trends. Triangulation simply means that we try to determine cause and effect through more than one method. For example, in this chapter we look at the findings from reviews, experimental and quasi-experimental studies, and correlational studies to see if there is support for benefits that have been attributed to parent involvement. These are the steps we followed in examining the studies and reviews for this chapter.

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correlation between parent involvement and achievement. Based on this correlation, they suggested that " . . . the academic achievement of Mexican-American students can be raised by increasing parent involvement; parents who are actively involved in discussing school

Correlational Designs

Much of the research on parent involvement and student achievement is correlational. Researchers conducting correlational studies do not always attempt to control variables; they are interested in relationships between variables. For example, one might ask the question, is the degree to which parents are involved in their child's education related to their child's achievement on, say, a reading test? If we could obtain a score for degree of involvement and then measure the child's reading ability, we could calculate a correlation statistic and estimate the relationship. Let's say we found a relatively strong relationship, for example, $r = .80$. That is, for those parents who had a higher degree of involvement, their children tended to have higher reading scores. There is a relationship, but is there evidence that high parent involvement resulted in high student achievement? No. Causation can never be determined from just knowing that a relationship exists. We never know for sure if there are other potentially casual variables at work, and we do not know for sure if the direction of the relationship is what we would expect. For instance, in our example above, there is evidence that parents tend to be more involved if their children are doing well. But did involvement cause achievement or did achievement cause involvement? We don't know. Well, then, is correlational research valuable? Yes. From correlational research we can detect simple and complex relationships. These relationships provide a base for additional research and information to help determine the strength of causal relationships.

Correlational studies are divided into bivariate and multivariate studies. Bivariate studies examine the relationship between a pair of variables, without regard to the relationship of other variables to the variables in the pair. A correlation between two variables can be influenced by one or more other variables. Not considering other relevant variables can be misleading. An example is the relationship between attending Head Start and first-grade achievement, which has been estimated at $r = -0.19$. This negative correlation implies that if children attend Head Start, their first-grade achievement will decrease. However, if another variable termed "educational advantage" — usually associated with high socioeconomic status — is included in the analysis, the relationship between attending Head Start and first-grade achievement is $r = .30$.[10] This change in the r value is because educational advantage is negatively correlated with Head Start ($r = -0.70$). That is, children who have a lower educational advantage are likely to be eligible for Head Start, and typically they are academically behind children who do not qualify for Head Start.

Many of the multivariate studies we reviewed involved "causal modeling techniques." Interestingly, most of the good quantitative studies conducted between the years 1985 and 1995 used causal modeling designs rather than experimental designs. And even though causal modeling techniques are powerful, when using this technique it is important to be cautious in interpreting these results and not to overstate the cause-and-effect relationship due to the nonexperimental nature of the research. Given these cautions, however, causal modeling techniques are considered the most powerful method of analyzing nonexperimental data.

activities and have high educational aspirations for their children can make a difference."[11] The authors encourage school psychologists to work with parents of Mexican-American students and help them get more involved in their children's education. This recommendation is supported by a literature review conducted by Sandra Christensen and her colleagues.[12]

Results of the study of Mexican-American eighth-graders are supported by another study conducted by Arthur Reynolds in 1991.[13] He analyzed a subset of data from another large national database — the Longitudinal Study of Children At Risk (LSCAR) — describing 481 low-income, minority second-graders. He found a relatively small but positive correlation between parent involvement and achievement. He noted that " . . . parental involvement by itself is insufficient to yield the kind of results often expected. Parent involvement, to be maintained and enriching, must be reinforced by school practices as well as children's own experiences. . . . Because it is often unrealistic to expect parents to initiate such involvement due to their own school experiences, schools must play a major role in encouraging involvement through, for example, regular invitations to school or to social events."[14]

Kim Yap and Donald Enoki conducted a study to identify parent involvement practices that correlate with positive outcomes of Chapter 1 programs.[15] Study participants were enrolled in 10 Chapter 1 project schools in Hawaii in 1994, and a majority were Asian or Pacific Islanders in grades three through nine. Chapter 1 schools have a relatively high percentage of students from low-income families. The researchers surveyed students, parents, and teachers to determine the type and intensity of parent involvement. They also conducted three extensive case studies. They found that " . . . few significant relationships appeared to exist between parent involvement activities and children's school performance. Where a link was found, it generally related to home-based reinforcement provided by parents."[16] Home-based reinforcement included encouraging reading, caring about what happens in class, keeping track of school progress, and finding children a place to study. Parents, students, and teachers in this study also expressed satisfaction with parent involvement.

Experimental Studies. One of the best experimental studies reviewed for this chapter was conducted by John Fantuzzo and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania.[17] They examined the effect of parent involvement on self-concept and mathematics achievement of fourth- and fifth-grade at-risk, black students. This 1995 study was a replication of previous studies conducted in 1992 and in 1993.[18] The researchers were interested in knowing if the addition of a parent involvement program (PI) to a reciprocal peer tutoring (RPT) program would increase math achievement more than using only the RPT program. Previous studies have shown RPT to be an effective instructional strategy.

Seventy-eight students were randomly assigned to one of three groups: a combined parent involvement and RPT program group (PI+RPT), a parent involvement only group (PI), and a control group. The RPT program involved pairs of students who set team goals and worked together in alternating roles as teacher or student. Students worked computational problems under the supervision of classroom assistants and were rewarded for attaining

Experimental Designs

When designing and conducting experimental studies, researchers attempt to control all of the variables that could account for the results. For example, a researcher may want to determine if implementing a set of parent involvement strategies results in higher reading achievement. He or she would administer a reading test to all students in the classroom before implementing the program (pretest), assign students randomly to one of two groups, implement the parent involvement strategies with parents and children in one group but not the other, and then administer a second reading test (posttest) to all the students. The researcher wants to determine if any differences between pretest and posttest scores are the result of the parent involvement strategies and not some other variable or variables, such as the school's reading program or children's natural maturation. Controlling for the influence of these other variables is typically achieved by including a "control" group that does everything the experimental group does except for participating in the experimental program or "treatment."

To help insure equivalence between the experimental group and the control group, the researcher randomly assigns students to each group. Random assignment and equivalency between groups are extremely important, because the researcher wants to say that all variables that may influence the outcome of the study affect each group of students identically. Random assignment to groups, or the lack thereof, is the primary difference between experimental and quasi-experimental studies.[19] Experimental studies involve random assignment and are clearly the stronger of the two. However, quasi-experimental studies may provide corroborating evidence.

team goals. The parent involvement program involved parents communicating with school personnel and rewarding achievement. For example, teachers and parents communicated with each other through notes and telephone calls. At the end of each week, parents were informed by teachers of their child's achievements through "celebration" notes. Parents then engaged in reward activities with their children, such as going to movies, shopping, and playing games. Parents adapted the program to their particular situations, including how they would communicate with the school and how they would reward their children's achievements. This participation in planning helped maintain the parents' participation in the program and accommodate parents' schedules. Parents did not supplement teaching activities, but they did reinforce positive school experiences.

The results of this carefully designed study revealed a statistically significant difference between the math achievement mean scores of the PI+RPT group and those of the control group. There was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the PI group and those of the control group, nor was there a difference between the mean scores of the PI group and those of the PI+RPT group. There was, however, a difference between the mean scores of both the PI+RPT group the PI group and those of the control group that is considered to be educationally significant. That is, the difference would be considered important by persons making decisions about practice. A common measure of educational significance, that is, the importance of a finding for

practitioners, is the standardized mean difference (SMD) statistic. SMD scores as well as pretest and posttest scores are reported in Table 1 below. SMD scores ranged from 0.22 to 0.80, which is considered important according to the guidelines used by a national board that reviews federally funded educational research projects.[20]

Table 1. Pre- and posttest mean scores and standard deviations, as well as adjusted mean scores and standard mean difference, for all groups on two standardized mathematics achievement tests.

	PI+RPT (n = 13)			PI (n = 12)			Control (n = 13)		
	Pretest Mean	*Posttest Mean*	*Adjusted Mean*	*Pretest Mean*	*Posttest Mean*	*Adjusted Mean*	*Pretest Mean*	*Posttest Mean*	*Adjusted Mean*
Curriculum-Based Computation Rate									
Mean	5.13	6.79	6.90	5.36	5.98	5.91	5.32	5.52	5.48
SD	2.13	1.92		1.85	1.86		1.85	2.04	
SMD			0.73			0.22			
Standardized Computation									
Mean	520.77	564.61	568.48	529.17	556.00	552.71	526.27	537.58	536.75
SD									
SMD			0.80			0.40			

Posttest mean scores were adjusted for differences in pretest mean scores, and the SMD scores were calculated by dividing an adjusted mean difference between groups by the average of the pretest standard deviations.

The educational significance, as portrayed by the SMD scores shown in Table 1, is greatly strengthened because the Fantuzzo study was a well-designed and carefully implemented replication. The results of this study are similar to the two replicated studies that preceded it, which, taken together, provide fairly convincing evidence that a low-cost parent involvement program can make a difference in mathematics achievement of low-achieving students from low-income families. The parent involvement program was well adapted for this population. And it was designed to fit the parents' schedules, a critical consideration in single-parent households or in households where both parents work sometimes at more than one job.

The importance of teachers communicating with low-income parents is supported by a similar study conducted by Sadie Grimmett and Mae McCoy.[21] They implemented a parent involvement program in which a school's reading program was described in detail for the parents and a communication system about children's progress in the reading program was established between the school and the parents. The strategies were intended to encourage the involvement of parents who feel they lack knowledge about their child's instructional programs and about how to communicate with teachers. Parents were provided details about

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the program, including goals, reading instruction terminology, the diagnostic prescriptive cycle used by the school district, and instructional procedures. A form was provided whereby both parents and teachers communicated about the child's progress in reading. The researchers of this well-designed experimental study found that the children who received the program performed significantly better on the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test than did a group of children whose parents were not involved in the program: SMD scores of 1.02 for vocabulary and 0.73 for comprehension were obtained for the children whose parents were involved in the reading program, revealing significant differences between the two groups.

Another study, conducted by Blanche Edwards Clegg in 1973, involved second-graders, 90% of whom were black.[22] Students were randomly assigned to either a treatment or a control group. The treatment involved geographic games that were directly related to the students' reading instruction. The games, which parents and children played together, stressed skills such as attending, recognizing words, rhyming, creating sentences, and comprehending. Parents used tally sheets to report successes or difficulties and progress to teachers. Game sessions averaged 30 minutes and were played three times a day. Parents who could attend group meetings were trained in the use of the games, and parents who could not attend the group meetings were trained during home visits. Significant differences were found between the mean scores of children in the treatment group and those of children in the control group on the composite reading and vocabulary subtests of the Primary Battery of the Metropolitan Achievement Test. SMD scores ranged between 0.53 and 1.11, which would be considered educationally significant.

The three experimental studies described above were conducted with at-risk, mostly black children from low-income families. The findings from these studies are important because low-income parents are generally not as involved as parents with higher incomes.[23] It is also important to consider that the parent involvement programs used in these studies may not have the same effect on the general population of students.

Another noteworthy study is a follow-up of a large-scale, longitudinal study in rural Appalachia with a population of families classified as lower middle class.[24] The initial study, conducted from 1967 to 1971, was called the HOPE program. Parents served as the primary teachers for their three- to five-year-olds. The parents viewed special TV programs, received parent guides and home visits, and participated in group sessions conducted by project staff. These components were designed to increase the effectiveness of parent's teaching skills through guidance, "tool skills," and support. Tool skills included information about child behavior and development, how to work with a child based on his or her interests, motivation, and developmental level, and knowledge of learning activities that are practical for home and community use. The children involved in the HOPE program showed significantly higher achievement gains on psycho-linguistic ability tests than did children in a control group whose parents viewed the special TV programs only.

Four years after the conclusion of the HOPE project, Edward Gotts examined the records of 341 of the original 600 child participants. He found that those children whose parents had participated in the HOPE program had significantly better grades and exhibited

significantly more positive behaviors as measured on the School Behavior Checklist. This follow-up study shows that parental involvement early in a child's education may have lasting effects. Gotts noted, "The present findings serve, in part, to confirm what many childhood educators already believe about the importance of involving parents in their children's early education."[25]

In addition to these experimental studies, four well-designed, quasi-experimental studies were reviewed.[26] The parents who participated in these studies were classified as families with low incomes. One common finding was an increase in parents' positive attitudes toward parent involvement and schools. But only two of these studies found that parent involvement programs had a significant effect on student achievement.[27] These findings are supported by a review of 29 studies conducted by M. Elizabeth Graue and her colleagues, who concluded that parent involvement had a moderate positive effect on student achievement.[28] In a study of 846 black, inner-city elementary school children, Herbert Walberg and his colleagues noted, "The most important result is that classes whose parents were intensively involved in the program gained an estimated 1.1 grade equivalents; classes whose parents were less intensively involved gained only .5 grade equivalents."[29] Common conclusions reported in these quasi-experimental studies include the following:

- Parent involvement programs need to be multi-year programs.
- Parents generally support parent involvement programs.
- Parents' attitudes toward parent involvement programs and schools improve when they are involved.
- Younger children generally show greater achievement gains in both reading and math than do older children when parents are involved in their schooling.

Parent Involvement and Student Achievement

To What Extent Is Parent Involvement Related to Student Achievement? Results of experimental studies reviewed here show statistically significant differences on measures of achievement between children whose parents participate in parent involvement programs and those who do not, and educational significance as indicated by SMD scores was attained in these studies. (SMD scores ranged between 0.53 and 1.11, which would generally be considered important differences.) The longitudinal study by Edward Gotts provides some evidence that positive effects of parent involvement on young children's achievement may persevere over time.[30] Findings from the quasi-experimental studies generally support the findings of the experimental studies.

Findings from the multivariate, correlational studies indicate that a child's ability and school climate have the strongest positive correlation with student achievement, but parent involvement is also positively correlated. The researchers reported that, on average, approximately 20% of the variation in student achievement is associated with parent involvement. That is, about 20% of the information needed to predict a student's achievement can

be found by knowing the level of his or her parent involvement. This finding is educationally significant and generally supported by the other correlational studies.

Overall, while other variables have stronger relationships with student achievement, parent involvement is an important variable. And, as noted earlier, the involvement of parents is one factor schools can influence.

What Kinds of Parent Involvement Have the Strongest Relationship with Achievement? Of all the aspects of parent involvement studied, parents' expectations of their children's achievement have the strongest relationship with children's actual level of achievement. This finding is pervasive, and it is also strongly supported by a literature review conducted in 1983 by Rachel Seginer.[31] Furthermore, taken together, results of the correlational studies we reviewed suggest that parents' communications with schools are important, as are their communications with their children about school. The relationship between parents helping with homework and student achievement is relatively weak; however, a stronger relationship exists between student achievement and parents encouraging the completion of homework and setting aside time and a place to do homework.

A consistent conclusion across studies is that effective parent involvement is dependent on strong support from schools. Traditionally, low-income parents have been less involved with their children's schooling. Therefore, it is particularly important for schools to initiate parent involvement with these parents. Schools must play a major role in encouraging involvement through regular invitations to school activities and social events. School personnel also need to help parents define their role in parent involvement in order for parents to gain a sense of efficacy in the process.[32] For example, Sandra Christenson and her colleagues believe school psychologists can play a substantial role in helping parents define roles.[33] Their literature review identifies five recurrent findings:

1) parents want their children to succeed;
2) parent participation occurs both at home and school;
3) participation is linked to parent expectations of achievement;
4) teacher efforts are more important than parent background; and
5) shared responsibility between parents and school personnel is important.

They recommend that school psychologists build on these findings to encourage and assist parents to have high expectations for student achievement, to provide a structure in the home for learning, to provide an effective home environment, and to maintain appropriate discipline.

Finally, parents need to be involved with school personnel in the process of developing parent involvement programs. Allison Carr and Ron Wilson note that parents often feel a lack of efficacy and are reluctant to get involved.[34] Amy Baker observes that parents are often unclear about how to help with homework and that parents often feel unwelcome at school.[35] School personnel can help by finding ways to encourage and assist with involvement, while recognizing parents' time constraints.

Do Some Forms of Parent Involvement Work Better with Particular Parents and Children?

Although mothers tend to be the parent most likely to be involved with their children's schooling, various studies also have investigated the involvement of fathers from single and two-parent households and stepmothers and stepfathers. Douglas Downey suggests that stepparents can be just as effective as birth parents in parent involvement activities.[36] All types of parents have been successful in parent involvement activities. Consequently, economic disadvantage should not be viewed as a barrier to getting parents involved. In fact, most of the studies evaluated in this chapter involved low-income parents whose children would be considered academically at risk. Economic disadvantage and cultural differences must be considered in planning parent involvement activities but should not be seen as predictive of failure.

These studies also included children of all ages. For example, one finding of interest is that parents of older (middle and high school) children tend to be more reactive; that is, they get involved only when problems arise.[37] This implies that parents of middle and high school students could be more proactive, and schools could reach out to involve parents more at the middle school level. In his study of third-graders, Reginald Clark states, "[H]igh achievers tend to come from families in which parents set high standards for their children's educational activities and maintain a home environment that supports learning."[38] This conclusion is supported by a study by Lourdes Diaz Soto, who found significant differences between high-achieving and low-achieving fifth- and sixth-grade Puerto Rican students with regard to parents' level of aspiration for children's academic success and the degree to which parents supported these aspirations.[39] That is, parents of high-achieving students have higher aspirations for their children's schooling than do parents of low-achieving students, and parents of high achievers are significantly more involved with their children in educational activities. The circular nature of this relationship invites us to ask, Does student achievement increase parents' aspirations, or do parents' aspirations influence achievement? The answer is likely a combination of both, but we can find no research to untangle this conundrum. Well-designed, longitudinal research is needed.

From a study of highly successful young people, Benjamin Bloom concluded, "We believe, as do the parents, that the parents' interest and participation in the child's learning contributed significantly to his or her achievement in the field. We find it difficult to imagine how these children could have gotten good teachers, learned to practice regularly and thoroughly, and developed a value of and commitment to achievement in the talent field without a great deal of parental guidance and support."[40] It is evident that a supportive home environment provided by parents with high expectations for their child's academic success is consistently related to higher achievement.[41] Concurring with these findings, Joyce Epstein found better success for parents who are " . . . aware, knowledgeable, and encouraging about school."[42] It is clearly important to establish formalized communication procedures and to encourage parents to take an active interest in their child's schooling.

Summary

Based on our review, we conclude that there is a moderate, positive relationship between parent involvement and student achievement. Other variables may have a stronger, positive relationship with student achievement, but the extent to which parents are involved and how they are involved can be influenced by schools, often through programs that are relatively inexpensive in terms of funding and time.

Possibly most important, parents' expectations of their children's academic achievement have the strongest positive relationship with children's actual level of achievement, a finding that is pervasive. Because many parents do not have time to attend numerous school functions, this may be particularly important for single parents and families in which both parents work. Expectations should be set high early in a child's schooling. Furthermore, communication systems between schools and parents need to be clear, structured, and consistent. Parents tend to be more involved if they are involved in planning parent involvement programs, and parents can be more helpful if they know details about the instructional programs their children are engaged in at school.

In the chapters that follow, specific ways educators can use research findings to begin or improve parent involvement programs in their own schools are discussed.

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Chapter Four

Using the Research: Administrators

We cannot really be child centered unless we are also family centered.
— Unknown

Even though there is strong support for parent involvement in education, few schools have strong parent involvement programs in place.[1] A recent survey indicates that most parents believe schools see them as important partners in their children's education, but most parents say schools should learn more about how to involve them effectively.[2] Research supports the idea that schools must take the initiative to organize and improve parent involvement programs.

Robert Roeser and his colleagues suggest that "some of the most important determinants of parent involvement in a child's schooling are related less to 'social address' characteristics of a family . . . and more to school and teacher practices that aim to include parents in significant ways in their child's education."[3] Joyce Epstein and Susan L. Dauber suggest that if schools do not reach out to parents, then "parent education and social class are very important for deciding who becomes involved. . . . [However,] . . . if schools take parent involvement seriously and work to involve all parents, then social class and parents' level of education decrease or disappear as important factors."[4]

Administrators need to provide strong support for parent involvement practices. Joyce Epstein suggests that a comprehensive parent involvement program "helps to create a positive school climate that ultimately affects all teachers' practices to involve parents."[5] Teachers who see administrators as supportive are more likely to use parent involvement strategies.[6] To be effective, administrators need to be educated about parent involvement. The sections that follow offer ways administrators can plan and implement parent involvement programs.

Characteristics of Strong Parent Involvement Programs

The variability and diversity of schools and families do not allow for one "best" parent involvement program, but there is sufficient research evidence on which to base practical suggestions. Joyce Epstein cautions educators, policy leaders, and parents to be mindful of the "misperception that any parent involvement leads to improved performance, or that any practice is as good as any other."[7]

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One of the major obstacles to parent involvement programs is a lack of planning.[8] While administrators should be the leaders in planning programs and setting policies, setting a global policy supporting parent involvement is insufficient. Several authors suggest that clear mechanisms for parent involvement are necessary. Especially important is planning ways that more parents or different parents or all parents can become involved. David Williams and Nancy Chavkin identify the following characteristics of strong parent involvement programs:

- they have written policies for a program that is designed to reach all parents;
- they provide administrative support;
- they provide training for educators and parents;
- they practice frequent, two-way communication;
- they network with other programs; and
- they have regular program evaluation activities.[9]

Both administrators and teachers need to recognize that "the most effective [parent involvement] techniques are those that rely on direct, personal contact between educators and parents."[10]

It is essential that administrators have active, written policies regarding parent involvement strategies. Without such policies, parent involvement depends on individual teacher or parent initiatives. Research suggests that effective parent involvement strategies are those where administrators and teachers (rather than parents) assume the initiative.[11] Teachers are more likely to involve parents when they feel some element of pressure to do so. Educational pressure is more effective than policy pressure; teachers will be more likely to implement strategies when they are educated about the benefits of involving parents. Teachers also are more likely to use parent involvement practices when they perceive that the administration is supportive of such practices.

In planning parent involvement programs, administrators may want to consider the conclusions of Judith Vandegrift and Andrea Greene that effective parent involvement requires parent support and participation in their child's education.[12] Critical factors administrators should consider in planning and implementing a parent involvement program include the following:

- enlist the support and commitment of your teachers and staff;
- involve parents and teachers directly in planning your program; and
- design programs that are meaningful to both parents and teachers.[13]

In planning parent involvement programs, schools should consider parents' needs as well as their own. Too often parent involvement is seen as *school centered*, that is, schools want to know how parents can help them. Rarely does the school contribute to the family's needs.[14] We should ask ourselves, What are the reasons for parent involvement? Joyce Epstein says the goal should be "to mobilize resources and support from all available sources to help

more children — ideally all children — to be more successful students from preschool through high school."[15] John Fantuzzo and his colleagues believe strongly that parents should help with the development of parent involvement programs.[16] Their research suggests that including parents in the development process will contribute to the success of a program.

Resources

Susan Swap observes, "In a workshop that I offered teachers recently, I asked them to identify the issues and constraints that kept them from reaching out to parents. One of the teachers replied without hesitation: 'time and money.'"[17] She notes that most time for parent involvement is either very short — 15-minute parent-teacher conferences — or involves negative issues. Parents and teachers are able to find time to deal with crises but not to deal with each other in positive ways. Administrators can provide incentives that encourage teachers to involve parents. However, what teachers need most to implement parent involvement programs is time. Administrators need to search aggressively for ways to support parent-teacher involvement programs, both financially and in terms of time. Some ideas for freeing up time for parent involvement include the following:

- double up classes;
- hire substitutes;
- reorganize school schedules; and
- enlist the help of volunteers.[18]

Administrators might also consider hiring a parent/family liaison to help teachers make parent contacts and coordinate family/school activities. A bilingual liaison can be especially useful in contacting the non-English speaking members of the community. Any resources that administrators can provide to help teachers in their parent involvement efforts will be worthwhile.

Communication

Good school-home communication is critical to good school-home relationships. Amy Baker notes that parents make inferences about the extent to which schools want parents to be in-

County Fairs and Goat Ropings

Clear, concise communication is essential to parent involvement programs. A written exchange between a high school principal and parent illustrates this point. The principal wrote the following note to a parent in an attempt to explain the school's learning program:

Our school's cross-graded, multi-ethnic, individualized learning program is designed to enhance the concept of an open-ended learning program with emphasis on a continuum of multi-ethnic, academically enriched learning using the identified intellectually gifted child as the agent or director of his own learning. Major emphasis is on cross-graded, multi-ethnic learning with the main objective being to learn respect for the uniqueness of a person.

The parent replied: I have a college degree, speak two foreign languages and four Indian dialects, have been to a number of county fairs and three goat ropings, but I haven't the faintest idea . . . what . . . you are talking about. Do you?[19]

volved by the ways in which they reach out to families and parents in the community.[20] The extent to which parents see that communication provides them with opportunities to provide feedback and input to the school also shapes their involvement. As was noted in chapter three, effective communication, along with positive reinforcement, has been found to affect students' self-concept and math achievement positively.[21]

Schools should use multiple means to communicate with parents. One type of communication that administrators can offer parents is a school policy handbook. This handbook would explain school policy on parent involvement as well as other policies, such as attendance, grading, discipline, and homework. Telephone numbers of key personnel as well as a calendar for the year might be included. A team of parents and teachers could be assigned the task of producing the policy handbook.[22]

Administrators and teachers can also provide information to parents through a school newsletter. Sending newsletters via the postal service rather than via students is one way to make sure *all* parents receive communications from school. Newsletters can do more than provide announcements of events; they can describe goals, recognize achievements, suggest home-learning activities, and solicit input from parents. One principal included an "Honor Roll" of parents who read aloud to their children daily.[23] Another way administrators can communicate with parents and the community is to run a school column in the local newspaper.[24] This might be conducted on a districtwide basis rather than on an individual school basis.

Administrators can encourage two-way communication by giving parents opportunities to contribute information such as the following:

- ask parents to complete information forms about their children;
- conduct surveys that identify parents' needs, interests, and attitudes about the school;
- obtain parents' perspectives on personnel decisions; and
- ask parents to help develop plans for school improvement.[25]

Communication is one of the most traditional and vital forms of parent involvement, but it is often poorly implemented. No parent involvement program can succeed without effective communication.

Collaboration Is Critical

A study of parents' beliefs about education suggests that schools can benefit from *collaborating* with them rather than competing with them or shutting them out.[26] As Lee Shumow notes, "[S]haring among parents and teachers about children's learning, adjustment, and progress, as well as representation of children's home experiences in school offer[s] promising avenues for promoting home school relations."[27] He found that many parents agree with educators about instructional approaches, assessment, and teachers' roles, but they disagree with educators' educational goals. Most parents in the study identified the "traditional goal

of transmitting basic skills as the most important purpose of schooling."[28] In contrast, the current educational reform movement stresses critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills. This discrepancy suggests that parents and educators need to communicate and collaborate on educational goals. Home-school relationships are more likely to improve when the school takes parents' beliefs, values, and feelings into account.

Focus groups conducted to identify critical parent involvement issues reveal that one barrier to greater involvement is the nature of the relationship between parents and the schools.[29] Parents in the study voiced several common complaints about schools' parent involvement programs. Many felt that schools did not really want them to be involved. One parent stated that if the school invited her to come, she was welcome, but she did not feel welcome when she came of her own accord. Another parent suggested the school wants parents to be involved only on the school's terms. Finally, parents were discouraged about involvement because they felt school administrators supported teachers whenever there was a controversy, and they did not give students or parents a fair hearing. This same study found that schools can facilitate parent involvement if they do the following:

- make parents feel welcome;
- demonstrate that schools care about children; and
- offer services and programs to parents.

One way administrators can show they care about parents being involved is to hold an annual conference for parents and educators, where the school's parent involvement program can be explained. In addition, this is a good time to get input from parents about issues that are important to them. Such collaborative efforts may improve home-school relationships.

Besides providing benefits to students, collaborating with parents can provide benefits to schools as well.[30] For example, happy parents are more inclined to cooperate with schools. Teachers feel less alienated and better supported when parents are involved. Satisfied, involved parents are more inclined to support the schools financially and to solicit support from the community. Thus, a collaborative relationship with parents can be mutually beneficial.

Establish a Parent Resource Center

The parent center — a room set aside at the school for parents — is one service administrators can offer to parents. Parent centers can help improve parent involvement and home-school communication. Most importantly, as Sara Lawrence Lightfoot suggests, "the presence of parents can transform the culture of a school."[31] A parent center sends the message to parents that they are important.[32] Teachers may enjoy a place to interact with parents, too. Administrators can be the primary catalyst in establishing parent resource centers. These centers can reap the following benefits:

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- encourage person-to-person contact between parents and teachers;
- provide information and materials about school programs and community resources that are available to parents;
- provide a place for parents to meet other parents and teachers; and
- provide continuing education opportunities for parents.

An exchange program is one activity that might be included in a parent center.[33] Here parents can exchange outgrown clothes, toys, and books. A parent volunteer might manage this activity. No matter what activities are incorporated into a parent center, the goal should be to help parents feel comfortable at school, because parents who feel comfortable will more likely support the school.

Organize Workshops and Activities

Workshops and activities are other ways administrators can involve parents in school. Some suggestions for workshops include the following:

- parents-only field trips, so parents can, in turn, take their children;
- make-it, take-it workshops;
- parent-child workshops, for example, bookmaking;
- parent effectiveness workshops;
- classes that middle or secondary students and parents can take or work on together; and
- educational/informational workshops that consist of discussions, lectures, and videos on other topics of interest, such as building children's self-esteem, balancing work and family responsibilities, and child development.[34]

Michelle Fine warns that the danger of some kinds of workshops is the implication that a problem lies with the family system.[35] Administrators should keep this advice in mind as they plan their parent involvement programs.

Suggestions for activities that are effective at both the elementary and secondary level include:

- host a talent show;
- host a community theater performance;
- plan a "pack the gym" event;
- plan special parent/alumni events;
- host a principal's lunch with parents or a community coffee; and
- provide ways for families to use the school as a community center.[36]

Provide Training

M. Laurie Leitch and Sandra S. Tangri observe that "[t]eachers' and parents' lack of knowledge about ways they can use each other more effectively is the major barrier to positive

home-school relationships."[37] One contributing factor to the scarcity of parent involvement programs is lack of training. In their 1988 survey, Nancy Chavkin and David Williams found that less than 5% of teachers had attended a formal course on parent involvement.[38] Sixty-five percent of teacher educators stated they had devoted only one class to the topic or discussed it casually. The results of a survey of state teacher certification requirements revealed the following:

> Many states do not mention working with parents or families; those that do rarely define parent involvement in clear, precise terms; phrases such as "parent involvement," "home-school relations," or "working with parents" often appear with no further explanation. Of the 22 states that do mention parent involvement in certification requirements, 8 states mention it for both early childhood certification and K-12 certification, 5 states mention it for early childhood certification only, and 9 states mention parent involvement for K-12 certification only.[39]

Educators are urged to use research findings in their classroom, but it is impossible to apply research if one doesn't know what the research says. This is why teacher education about parent involvement is absolutely critical. Data from studies on inservice training provide evidence that research findings can be taught and that teachers can learn to apply the findings in their classroom.[40] Obviously, teachers cannot apply research findings on parent involvement if they do not know what those findings are. Administrators have a responsibility to provide such educational opportunities for teachers. They can provide written information on the subject, investigate workshops or classes offered in the area, and let their staff know about these opportunities; most importantly, administrators can educate themselves and model effective parent involvement practices.

Adequate training and program organization at the school level can relieve teachers of the additional investment of time spent developing their own programs. A recent survey of high school teachers reported that many feel they need more time, training, and information in order to involve families effectively.[41] Research-based parent involvement programs, which can give educators direction, have already been developed, such as TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork), developed by Joyce Epstein and associates, and MegaSkills, developed by Dorothy Rich.[42] Administrators might want to look into such programs and see if they are appropriate for their own schools.

Parents and School Governance

One of the most controversial and underemphasized areas is the practice of involving parents in school governance and decision making. A 1997 survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago revealed that very few parents are involved in decision-making areas such as curriculum, school budget, or staff hiring and evaluation.[43] Many educators are uncomfortable with parents in such roles. This is understandable, since involving additional people in school governance can be a difficult process. In addition, educators may feel parents are not qualified to make school decisions. The majority

of parents, on the other hand, feel they are quite capable of making good decisions.[44] It may be that school reform efforts cannot succeed unless all stakeholders — parents as well as teachers — are included as full partners in educational decision making.[45]

Many researchers believe parent involvement in school governance and decision making is important; however, few research efforts have addressed the relationship between parent involvement in school governance and decision making and student achievement or other variables. Of the few studies that have been conducted, none offers evidence of a causal relationship.[46] In addition, some authors suggest that there may be pitfalls in involving parents in these roles.

One of these is that many parents base their views and decisions on what is valuable for their own child. As Lee Shumow explains, "On the one hand, this tendency is to be expected and encouraged. Parents should be advocates for their children. On the other hand, if the parent representative has an agenda based on their own child(ren), this limits their representativeness, in effect creating a new power elite. Perhaps schools should attempt to obtain the opinions of all parents."[47]

While there is no extant research indicating a direct causal relationship between parent involvement in school governance and achievement, there may be other relationships that could prove to be beneficial. For example, involving parents in school governance and decision making may —

- eliminate parents' and educators' mistaken assumptions;
- improve parents' ability to serve as resources;
- increase parents' skills and confidence; and
- increase parents' enthusiasm as advocates for the school in the community.[48]

The decision to involve parents in decision-making roles is a direct responsibility of administrators. Oftentimes, however, involving parents in decision making turns out to be involving them in token advisory roles. If parents are included on advisory committees, their advice should be considered carefully in any decisions that are made. Where administrators *do* involve parents in school governance, they should take care that such involvement is meaningful. There are a number of committees that parents might participate in that are highly relevant to them and their children, for example,

- curriculum policy review committee,
- student placement committee,
- staff hiring and evaluation committee, and
- school site governing board.[49]

Some parents may not want to be involved in school governance, but nearly all parents want to be heard. Administrators can involve parents indirectly by being sure to consider parents' opinions when they make decisions.

Surveys of parent involvement strategies show that parent-teacher organizations are a common way to get parents involved in school governance.[50] In fact, early parent-teacher

organizations were a result of efforts by mothers to have more input into the school system. However, Tommie Radd suggests that many parents believe parent-teacher organizations do very little to help their family.[51] Radd suggests that parent organizations often "lack objectivity and inclusiveness."[52] Recognizing the need to revitalize parent-teacher organizations, the National PTA has identified the following six goals to improve parent involvement:

- Recognize that families have changed dramatically.
- Keep in mind the needs and abilities of the organization's members.
- Offer services that will attract new members.
- Conduct a variety of activities.
- Set goals and put them in writing.
- Make sure the PTA's goals support those of the school.[53]

Administrators can have a positive influence if they encourage parent-teacher organizations to incorporate these suggestions. A well-functioning parent-teacher organization is an excellent way to involve parents in school governance, advisory roles, and decision-making opportunities.

Summary

In the past 20 years, there has been a dramatic increase in our understanding of effective educational practices. Unfortunately, in many areas much of this research knowledge has not been applied to practice. This is equally true of the research findings on parent involvement in education. Several benefits have been attributed to parent involvement programs, but few schools have strong programs in place. It is encouraging that schools are recognizing the need to involve parents.

Administrators are key players in making changes in educators' parent involvement practices. Of course, without teacher support parent involvement programs would never succeed. Gary Fenstermacher suggests four approaches that might be taken to make changes in any educational practice:

- Make them eat cake; a mandated, top-down approach that is not advocated in this book.
- Let them eat cake; a gentler approach, but still authoritarian.
- Where's the cake; a similar prescriptive approach.
- You can have your cake and eat it, too; an educative approach with teacher participation.[54]

Regarding this last approach, Fenstermacher notes, "[T]eachers are given access to new knowledge and understanding in ways that assist them to take possession of that knowledge, to work out its implications and its consequences for their own settings and contexts. This approach rests on a distinction between describing and acting."[55] Administrators who use this approach give teachers the opportunity to make their own sense out of research findings. Overall, the most critical things administrators can do is to plan and support strong

parent involvement in the schools. The application of such programs can primarily be left to the teacher.

Regardless of time or money constraints, any administrator can involve parents in some preliminary ways:

- Create school policies that encourage and support parent involvement.
- Hire teachers who enjoy working with parents.
- Evaluate staff on their parent involvement practices.
- Model effective parent involvement practices.
- Display signs that welcome visitors.
- Post a map of the school.
- Make a welcoming display in the entrance hallway.
- Listen to parents' concerns.[56]

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Chapter Five

Using the Research: Teachers

Just as drawing a picture of a stream cannot be compared with damming the stream to store water, there is an enormous difference between describing a classroom and changing it.

— Gary Fenstermacher[1]

People's attitudes toward parent involvement can affect their parent involvement practices, as noted earlier. But simply having a positive attitude about parent involvement is insufficient to motivate a person to engage in parent involvement practices. Likewise, knowing what educational research says about parent involvement will not determine which parent involvement practices a person undertakes. *Knowing* is the *what* of research. The difficulty comes in applying research — the *how*. This chapter offers suggestions for how research on parent involvement in education can be applied in the classroom. As with any effort to apply research, teachers need to keep their particular classroom and students in mind. Time constraints of both parents and educators make it impossible to implement all of these suggestions. A good approach might be to implement two or three, or take an existing parent involvement practice and improve it.

Provide Mechanisms for Involvement

Research indicates that parents *do* want to be involved but often do not know *how* to be involved. As Laurie Leitch and Sandra Tangri observe, "[I]t is the lack of specific planning, or, at a more basic level, the lack of knowledge about how each can use the other person more effectively that is a major barrier."[2] Teachers are the most important agents for reaching out to parents and families. Joyce Epstein and Susan Dauber point out that the attitudes and practices of teachers are the most important variables for involving parents effectively.[3] When organizing a parent involvement program, educators should ask, How might more parents or different parents or all parents become involved? When we say *all* parents, we mean non-custodial as well as custodial parents. Teachers who want to involve parents can do so if they have a clear plan and ask parents to help. Lack of planning is a primary obstacle to home-school collaborations.[4] Thus, a clear plan for parent involvement is essential. As mentioned in the previous chapter, strong parent involvement programs —

- have written policies designed to reach all parents;
- provide administrative support;
- provide training for educators and parents;
- practice two-way communication;
- network with other programs; and
- have regular program evaluation activities.[5]

A recent survey of 1,823 elementary and secondary educators from 29 states identified the following most important ways teachers believe parents can help students:

- attend a conference with the child's teacher;
- help the child with homework;
- tell the child regularly that doing well in school is important; and
- contact the school when problems develop.[6]

What Parents Want Teachers to Do

According to information published by the National PTA, parents wish teachers would do the following:

- help build students' self-esteem;
- be sensitive to individual needs, interests, and special talents;
- communicate often and openly with parents;
- assign meaningful homework;
- set high academic standards for all students;
- show dedication and enthusiasm about teaching children;
- treat all children fairly;
- enforce a positive discipline code based on clear and fair rules;
- encourage parent involvement; and
- provide direction on how parents can work with children and their homework.[7]

These ways of involving parents are very traditional. Very few of the educators surveyed listed *volunteer in the school* or *help arrange learning programs* as important ways for parents to be involved. The suggestions that follow provide additional ideas for involving parents effectively. Traditional parent involvement practices can be useful, but much more can be accomplished by expanding such practices.

Consider Communication

Research suggests that relevant and frequent communication between school and home has positive effects.[8] As Carole Ames views it, "When [school-to-home] communications contain information that may influence parents' perceptions of their children as learners, when they give parents a sense of efficacy, and when they make the parent feel comfortable with school, parent involvement seems to be enhanced."[9] In Indiana's Transparent School Model, where teachers left daily messages for parents and parents could leave messages for teachers, parent-teacher contact increased 800%.[10] Parents of children at all grade levels want schools to keep them better informed. Unfortunately, middle school and high school teachers communicate less often and with fewer families than do elementary teachers.[11] Lori Connors and Joyce Epstein note, "On the one hand, the lack of phone calls and

conferences and other communications from the school may reflect generally positive conditions, because under present policies, high schools contact families mainly to discuss serious problems of students. Thus, no news is presently good news. This reality, however, ignores parents' need to know more in order to interact with and guide their teens about school and decisions for the future."[12]

Most parents view communication as critical. They want information about school structure, rules, organization, course requirements, homework policies, and about their children (especially positive information).[13] They want to know how their child is doing academically as well as socially. In one study, 89% of parents rated the work their child brings home as the single most important source of information about their child's academic achievement.[14] In another study, parents felt that schools do not provide them with enough samples of successful student work.[15]

Communication is most effective when it is positive. Communication that offers parents optimism and suggests that children can and want to learn will be more motivating to parents.[16] Communication is one of the most common, traditional forms of parent involvement. Teachers can readily use and expand on this existing form of parent involvement by doing one or more of the following:

- personalize school-home contacts;
- send letters home at the beginning of the school year;
- make good-news phone calls;
- identify and address parents' needs and concerns;
- enhance two-way communication, for example, develop a home-to-school and school-to-home form;
- share information that parents need and want, for example, let them know if their child needs extra help;
- distribute school newsletters and calendars;
- use electronic technology for communication, for example, a school hotline;

Positive Communication

Parents value positive information about their children. One parent remembers such an event with great appreciation:

"I had an incident last year in second grade, three weeks into the school year and I got a phone call from this teacher. And it's like, 'Hmmm, why is she calling me?' And she called to say, 'I'm just telling you that you have a wonderful son.' And it felt so good to get a call like that."[17]

One teacher offers the following suggestion for positive communication:

"Before school begins, I take the class list and divide it in thirds. I call one-third of my students' parents each week for the first three weeks of school. I mention specific and positive behavior the child is showing in class. I might say, 'I appreciate having your child in the room because she's so helpful with passing out papers in the morning.' Parents always expect negative news, so I find that this call sets a tone with them. I know that because of it, they feel more welcome to participate in their child's school experience."[18]

Lisa Feder-Feitel suggests that frequent positive communication will help establish rapport and make it easier when problems arise.[19]

- offer voice mail, so parents can leave messages at times that are convenient for them;
- organize orientation and/or open houses;
- find ways to communicate with all parents; and
- establish a web site for the school or classroom.[20]

Parent focus groups suggest that one barrier to communication is children. Many parents reported that children lost information sent home from school. As one parent noted, [schools think that] "we don't care . . . and then we think that they're not sending us notices, so it's a lack of communication back and forth."[21] Schools may want to consider other methods that might help eliminate this problem, such as direct mail or phone calls.

Restructure Parent-Teacher Conferences

Sandra Tangri and Laurie Leitch found that parent-teacher conferences are typically used for exchanging information rather than as an opportunity for making specific plans for action or reevaluation.[22] Parents in Amy Baker's focus groups said the typical biannual, 15-minute conferences are too short and too sparse to be very meaningful.[23] To improve parent involvement through parent-teacher conferences, educators might try one or more of the following:

- accommodate parents' schedules;
- give sufficient notice of parent-teacher conferences;
- provide good news, not just bad;
- involve students in conferences;
- expand the time allotted for conference;
- discuss parent involvement options with parents;
- choose a plan of action, for example, student/teacher/parent contracts;
- ask administrators to help make coming to see the teacher easier, for example, provide transportation and child care for families in low-income or unsafe neighborhoods; and
- personally contact parents who do not come to a conference.[24]

Provide Home Educational Activities

Most parents feel teachers could involve them more extensively in at-home learning activities.[25] Milbrey McLaughlin and Patrick Shields found home-based parent involvement strategies (at all grade levels) are more productive than school-based parent involvement strategies, particularly for low-income families.[26] Henry Becker and Joyce Epstein have identified several educational activities that involve parents at home:

- discussion activities, such as viewing a television program together and then discussing it;
- informal learning activities, such as games or activities related to schoolwork;
- parent-teacher contracts in which parents agree to supervise and help children with homework;

- activity calendars, including curriculum-related suggestions for daily activities with children.[27]

Joyce Epstein suggests that teachers can involve parents in undemanding ways, too, for example:

- read regularly to their child or listen to them read;
- take their child to the library;
- talk with their child about what they do at school;
- observe their child in the classroom;
- sign homework to assure that it is completed;
- practice spelling with their child or drill them on math or help with another assignment.[28]

Parents might increase their home reading activities if teachers were to inform them about the results of a review of parent practices regarding children's reading achievement. The author of one review concluded that children whose parents read to them eight to ten minutes a day have more positive attitudes toward reading and higher achievement levels; children who talk about the story with their parents and ask questions have higher performance scores; and children whose parents initiate conversation about the story have higher reading scores.[29] Other home-related educational activities in which teachers can involve parents include tutoring programs, homework helpers, and homework hotlines.

While research suggests that involving parents in home educational activities may be one of the more beneficial forms of parent involvement, some teachers may have hesitations. One big concern is whether parents or children have the time to spend on such activities. When teachers include home educational activities in their

No Time for Parent Involvement

Comments by teachers illustrate the concerns they have about parents' time for parent involvement.

"More and more of my 'parents' are single parents and sole support. Their time and energy are limited. They do want to cooperate for the most part but are too tired and overworked. I don't even help my own children very much because I am too tired when I get home."[30]

"Working parents have more demands on their time. Helping kids at home becomes a more frustrating task when a parent is tired or has many jobs to do."[31]

A second-grade teacher sent a note home explaining her policy about homework. She thoughtfully explained that she was aware of the time constraints of most families. She wanted the parents to know that they didn't need to feel bad if they and their children were unable to find time to do the assigned homework on a particular night. Her suggestion was that parents just get things done when they were able. This kind of attitude is a tremendous comfort to busy parents. It lets them know that the teacher understands. Consequently, parents have a more positive attitude toward the teacher and school in general.

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parent involvement strategies, they need to be cognizant of parents' and students' time constraints.

Involve Parents in the School and Classroom

Anne Henderson observes that "[i]t is not unusual to hear experienced educators say that once children are in school, their education is best left to the professionals."[32] While the involvement of parents in the school and classroom is important, some teachers feel threatened by the presence of parents in the classroom. They may not realize that benefits can come from this important practice. Parents themselves may not realize that they can and

Ways Volunteers Can Help at Elementary School

- Tell stories.
- Listen to children read, and read to children.
- Lead flash card drills.
- Help contact parents about school or classroom activities.
- Reproduce materials for teachers.
- Help at recess.
- Prepare bulletin boards.
- Reinforce spelling or vocabulary words.
- Help in the library.
- Assist with arts and crafts projects.
- Visit with children; show that adults care.
- Dramatize a story.
- Help children with handwriting.
- Help children with motor skills.
- Help non-English speaking children.
- Share information about occupations.
- Help with special programs or assemblies.
- Give underachievers one-on-one assistance.
- Work with gifted children.
- Help with field trips.
- Teach a skill.
- Gather resource materials.

Ways Volunteers Can Help at Secondary School

- Help in the office.
- Make attendance calls.
- Help with school events.
- Reproduce materials for teachers.
- Work in the library.
- Help in the lunchroom.
- Tutor students who need extra help.
- Work on a school-to-home newsletter.
- Be a resource person for teachers.
- Act as a liaison for non-English speaking families.
- Prepare bulletin boards.
- Participate in Saturday work parties.
- Help with student clubs.
- Gather resource materials.
- Volunteer as a hall monitor.
- Have a monthly parent-teacher or parent-student lunch period.
- Mentor students.
- Provide homework help.
- Serve on advisory committee.[33]

should get involved in the school and classroom. They can serve as tutors or free up teachers' time by volunteering for simple tasks, such as photocopying and completing paperwork. If parents are in the classroom, they may better understand a teacher's perspective.

When there is a discrepancy between the home culture and the school culture, children will usually behave in ways that are consistent with the more familiar home culture. By including parents in the classroom, the unfamiliar school culture becomes more familiar and more like the home culture. Welcoming parents into the classroom also helps parents feel more positively toward the teacher and the school.

Teachers and parents may think that people who work outside the home do not have time to be involved at school because they typically work during school hours. The list in the box to the right offers suggestions for involving working parents at school.

Another way schools can include parents at school is by creating a parent resource center, as described in chapter four. An exchange program, where parents can swap outgrown clothes, toys, and books, is an activity that might be included in a parent center.[35] The main goal of a parent center is to help parents feel comfortable at school.

Ways People Employed Outside the Home Can Help at School

1. Participate in Saturday field trips.
2. Participate in Saturday work parties.
3. Serve as an after-school resource volunteer.
4. Work on the school newsletter.
5. Help with weekend fund-raising projects.
6. Make educational games at home that can be used at school.
7. Collect materials needed for arts and crafts projects.
8. Place a school volunteer poster at work.
9. Find others who can help at school.
10. Take students on a tour of your place of employment.
11. Help with a potluck dinner for the school.
12. Type materials for school or classroom.[34]

Make Home Visits

Of 39 recipients of the Teacher of the Year award, 21 made it a practice to conduct regular home visits, according to one report.[36] Results of another study suggest that there may be positive outcomes from such visits.[37] One teacher in this study said she gained "six weeks of knowledge about each child" during home visits conducted at the beginning of the school year.[38] Home visits may be particularly helpful for new families, low-income families, and immigrant families. Home visits might be arranged voluntarily on weekends, after school, or before the school year begins. Schools might give release time for home visits, or schools might consider using parent volunteers for home visits.[39] Numerous parent involvement program sites in Tennessee have used home-school coordinators to visit homes regularly, help with parent resource centers, and other activities.[40] One thing to keep in mind, as Ursula Cassanova notes, is that some parents might be uncomfortable inviting teachers into their home.[41] In this case, she suggests a neutral spot, such as a church hall or community building.

Build Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships

Parents sometimes feel that teachers do not really want them to be involved. In a survey by Amy Baker, one parent put it this way: "As parents, if you come to the teacher because you are concerned or you have a question or something, the initial reaction is that you are interfering . . . that I'm stepping on their toes and I should just mind my own business."[42] Other parents in this study also felt that teachers do not want them in the classroom. "It's OK if you show up on a field trip, but once you want to volunteer in a classroom some teachers have a problem with this and I don't understand why."[43] Some teachers may be concerned that parents will try to take over their responsibility or not follow their instructions.[44] Teachers can alleviate this concern by making their expectations clear to parent volunteers. For example, teachers may want to have a written set of instructions or expectations.

After a two-year study of urban school parent-teacher practices, Susan Swap concluded that, in cases where there is no history of parent involvement, informal social gatherings that include food and informal conversation are effective in initiating positive home-school relationships.[45] These activities might take place at the school or at a familiar community location, such as a local park. It is interesting to note that other researchers also have found that activities where food is served are more successful.[46] Vivian Johnson offers a rationale for why informal social events are so important. She believes that attention to the details of these activities signal to parents that they are welcome as equals, as if they are guests in our own home.[47] Once parents become comfortable and involved on a social level, then educators can more easily approach them on an academic level.[48]

Parents are also more likely to become involved when the school shows an interest in their community and culture. Unfortunately, schools sometimes shun parents when their home culture is not the norm. For example, a middle-class Italian immigrant parent reported the following experience:

> I've never been contacted by my children's school. However, when my sixth-grader brought home a C instead of her usual A's and B's, I thought I should talk to the teacher to see what I could do or to see what I had failed to do. My daughter's C was in English; therefore, I made an appointment with the English teacher, naturally. She was very antagonistic. She told me my daughter had chosen to make the grade she had, and that it was not bothering anyone but me. I reiterated the fact that I was there seeking her advice as a professional educator about what I as a parent could do. She said there was very little I could do, especially since we spoke languages other than English at home.[49]

Some examples of informal social events that offer the opportunity for families to meet with administrators and teachers include multi-cultural potluck dinners, family breakfasts, and holiday celebrations. Grade-level open houses or monthly open houses or open-house week (with refreshments) are other ways to involve parents.[50] If teachers are unsure about

how to make parents feel welcome, Rhoda Becher suggests that educators use the same skills they use in making friends.[51]

The most important thing teachers can do to facilitate the parent-school relationship is to show that they genuinely care about each individual child. Parents want teachers to nurture and protect their children. They want to feel that their child is in a warm, caring, and supportive environment. Parents in Amy Baker's focus groups made the following comments:

> The teacher needs to make numerous positive comments, especially individual comments, because even though they are in middle school, they still have little baby hearts — they have not matured yet.
>
> It's like . . . more love, it's a way to show love. That's what I'm saying, show more appreciation for the child.
>
> We want everyone to know everyone's names, like all the staff and faculty to know everyone's names, so that it would be like, "Hi, Andrea, how are you?" you know . . . everyone says, "Hi." You know it's like they're friendly and warm.[52]

Summary

Most teachers want to have parents involved in their children's education. This chapter suggests numerous ways teachers can involve parents both at school and at home. Unfortunately, there are very few resources or rewards for teachers who want to implement parent involvement practices. Parent involvement takes time. A survey by Joyce Epstein and Henry Becker reveals that teachers question whether the time put into involving parents is worth the effort.[53] They also worry about whether parents can find time to be involved. Even busy teachers and busy parents can support parent involvement strategies in some basic ways. Busy parents can get involved by setting high expectations, having a positive attitude about school, monitoring homework, and providing children with encouragement and support.[54] In fact, research shows that parent expectations may be critical to improving achievement.[55] Busy teachers can encourage busy parents to be involved in these basic ways:

- make parents feel important;
- communicate frequently and positively with parents;
- make parents feel welcome at school;
- let parents know that you care about their child; and
- encourage parents to model a positive attitude about education.

David Tyack and Larry Cuban observe, "Better schooling will result in the future — as it has in the past and does now — chiefly from the steady, reflective efforts of the practitioners who work in schools and from the contributions of the parents and citizens who support (while they criticize) public education. This might seem to be . . . common sense. But in planning reforms in recent years, policy elites have often just bypassed teachers and discounted their knowledge of what schools are like today."[56]

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Chapter Six

Additional Considerations and Concluding Thoughts

[T]oo many Americans are separated from each other by the pernicious belief that children who are poor and disadvantaged do not have what it takes to reach high levels of achievement and that no amount of learning will alter this circumstance. This fallacy . . . is an enduring impediment to the progress of American education.

— Richard W. Riley[1]

This final chapter examines parent involvement in the context of special populations. Also considered are barriers to effective parent involvement, cautions about practicing parent involvement, promises for parent involvement, and guidelines for practicing parent involvement. Special populations may include parents from lower-income or minority groups, parents of preschool children, or parents of children with disabilities. Here we limit our discussion to low-income and minority parents and fathers of school-age children. The amount of literature concerning the involvement of parents of children with disabilities is beyond the scope of this book. However, it should be noted that, as a whole, parents of children with disabilities are extraordinarily supportive and involved, and they maintain some of the strongest parent and advocacy groups in the country.

Parent Involvement and Special Populations

Involving Lower-Income and Minority Populations. The literature suggests that middle- and upper-income parents have a long history of involvement in the schools, whereas low-income and minority parents have a relatively short one. Additionally, parent involvement practices are more likely to take root in schools that serve middle- and upper-income populations than in schools that serve lower-income or minority populations.

Studies of the effect of socioeconomic factors on student achievement have found that, where socioeconomic factors are very strong, parent involvement does not make a substantial difference in student achievement. "Children from high-income families tend to do well; children from low-income families perform below average regardless of how their par-

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ents commit time," notes Anne Henderson.[2] Research shows that while parents' efforts can make a difference in achievement, it is difficult to overcome the disadvantages associated with low socioeconomic status.[3] Such assertions, however, should not discourage educators from implementing parent involvement practices in any school situation, because research shows that parents of every socioeconomic and ethnic background are concerned about their children's education. Longer program duration is an important component in successful parent involvement programs. As Florence Heisler and Francis Crowley observe, "[P]resent evidence indicates that the effects of enlisting parent participation in the education of their child in a depressed area will be discernible only after several years of concerted effort and will not produce any large, immediate educational improvement."[4] Educators may have to employ different strategies for different neighborhoods or circumstances. For example, low-income or minority parents often view schools as being solely responsible for their children's education. Schools can help these parents understand that a child's education should be a shared responsibility. And, as discussed previously, schools that promote a sense of community have higher parent participation among parents from all socioeconomic levels.[5]

One way to promote shared responsibility is to include parents in the development of parent involvement strategies. Based on their study of minority students and parents, John Fantuzzo and his colleagues believe including parents in development activities is crucial to success.[6] Involving parents in the planning stages empowers parents and helps them feel that they can make a difference.[7]

Some research suggests that parenting style may be a strong determinant of whether children perform well in school, regardless of other variables, such as parents' level of education, income, or social class.[8] Other research suggests that parental expectations also influence student achievement at all income levels.[9] (In these studies, most researchers measured parents' expectations by asking parents how much schooling they expected their children to attain.)

Development of parent involvement programs must include consideration of the special needs and characteristics of low-income and minority populations. Susan Swap points out that the diversity of children in America has outstripped the diversity of the teaching force.[10] This disparity may make it more difficult for teachers to reach minority parents. However, teachers who recognize this anomaly can find ways to include these parents in their parent involvement practices, such as enlisting parents' help in integrating multi-cultural perspectives in the classroom. Fostering continuity between diverse cultures is critical in helping both parents and students feel comfortable at school. When parents feel comfortable, they are more likely to be involved at school.

As noted earlier, the single most important factor in involving parents is how schools reach out to them. This is especially true in the case of low-income or minority parents. Administrators and teachers must take the initiative to make connections with hard-to-reach parents. Such efforts need to be diverse and persistent. Several authors have suggested that meeting parents and students in more familiar and informal settings can be constructive.[11] Schools should also consider special needs parents might have, such as transportation or child care.

Special consideration should be given to the communication needs of low-income or minority parents. Communication is just as critical, if not more so, with these populations as with any other population. Carole Ames found that school-to-home communication has the strongest effect on increasing the involvement of parents with less formal education.[12] Schools need to provide information to parents about such things as rules, requirements, and information on children's progress. Schools also need to communicate expectations for parent involvement. It is important to consider the language needs of minority parents. Nancy Feyl Chavkin and Dora Lara Gonzalez suggest that, where there are language barriers, written communication is not as effective as personal communication.[13]

James Comer acknowledges that parent participation in the education of children is important in all communities, particularly in low-income or minority communities, " . . . wherever parents feel a sense of exclusion, low self-esteem and/or hopelessness. Parents are the first and most important models and teachers of their children. If parents feel excluded, of little value and hopeless, they will likely transmit these attitudes to their children."[14]

An encouraging research finding is that involving parents as home-based tutors provides benefits for parents and children from all income levels and backgrounds.[15] Milbrey McLaughlin and Patrick Shields found that low-income " . . . parents who have taken on a tutoring role report that they understand more about the school — its programs, goals and expectations — that they are more comfortable approaching their child's teacher, and that their parenting role has been enhanced."[16] Such research results help us understand that parent involvement is an important ingredient in the success of all children.

Involving Fathers of School-Age Children. In previous chapters we have not distinguished between the involvement of mothers and fathers, nor do most researchers studying parent involvement make such a distinction. Many people probably assume that mothers are most certainly more involved in their children's education than are fathers. However, Christine Winquist Nord and her colleagues found that only in two-parent families are mothers more involved.[17] In single-parent families where the father is the head of the household, fathers are equally involved. As might be expected, children fare better when both parents in a two-parent family are involved. A father's involvement is at least as important as a mother's involvement and may be even more important. Nord found that a father's involvement had a slightly higher correlation with a child getting more high grades (described in the study as "mostly A's") than did a mother's. Obviously, it is important for educators to include fathers in their parent involvement plans.

Nord also investigated the apparent influence of nonresident fathers compared with resident fathers. In her study, she found that nonresident fathers were generally less involved than were resident fathers. In two-parent families, 31% of nonresident fathers were involved with their children's schooling compared with 75% of resident fathers. As might be expected, nonresident fathers who paid child support were much more involved than fathers who did not. Even though the relationship is small, it appears that the involvement of a nonresident father in school may reduce the probability of a child dropping out of school and

increase the probability that a child will be involved in school activities. This latter relationship may be due to the fact that, of all the parent involvement activities studied, nonresident fathers are most likely to attend school activities, such as sporting events. As with other parents, nonresident fathers' involvement diminishes as children get older. In general, these findings certainly support efforts to involve nonresident fathers in a parent involvement plan.

Barriers to Effective Parent Involvement

A recurrent theme in numerous parent involvement studies is the centering of blame for barriers to parent involvement: from the teachers' point of view, parents or the system are the primary barriers; from the parents' point of view, teachers and the school system are the primary barriers. As Michael G. Fullan observes, "On the one hand, most teachers say they want more contact with parents but seem to feel that many parents are unavailable or uninterested. On the other hand, most parents say that they want to find out more about what their children are supposed to learn and what they can do at home to help, although they need specific direction and support to carry out this role."[18] Centering blame can be a major barrier to effective parent involvement programs.

Larry Decker and his colleagues suggest that certain values, beliefs, and assumptions may get in the way of effective parent involvement practices.[19] For example, educators may believe that parents who do not attend school events do not care about their children's education. Research findings discussed in chapter two indicate that this assumption is unfounded. The majority of parents in numerous surveys indicate they *do* care about their children's education. In fact, whether they represent a low-, middle-, or upper-income stratum, or whether they represent a minority population, almost all parents value schooling just as much as teachers and administrators do. The dissonance lies in the perceptions parents and educators have of each other. For example, Laurie Leitch and Sandra S. Tangri found that " . . . parents spoke of lack of discipline and limited expectations at school, and teachers perceived too much permissiveness at home."[20]

Another barrier to effective parent involvement is the attitude that it is up to parents to get involved and find out what is going on at school. Several authorities note that it is the school's responsibility to reach out to parents. To that end, it is critical that educators are aware of possible barriers to successful parent involvement programs, many of which are elaborated in the literature on parent involvement.[21] Some of these, including misperceptions, inaccurate assumptions, and lack of training, are examined elsewhere in this book. Additional barriers and possible solutions to particular aspects of parent involvement follow here:

Are your communication practices conducive to successful parent involvement?

Barrier: Parents may have a low literacy level and may have difficulty reading newsletters or notes that are sent home.

Solution: Educators should assess each individual situation. Personal delivery of important information via phone calls or home visits are alternatives.

Barrier: Non-English speaking or limited-English-speaking parents may have difficulty communicating with the schools.

Solution: First assess each family's situation. Direct face-to-face communication may be more productive than written communication. Enlist the help of bilingual parents or personnel. Never ignore the situation. Effective communication is especially critical to families who are trying to adjust to a different culture.

Do school practices accommodate the diversity of families?

Barrier: Parents with non-majority cultural and linguistic backgrounds may be uncomfortable becoming involved in the school. Or parents who have been discriminated against previously may feel alienated and hesitate to get involved.

Solution: School administrators and staff members should familiarize themselves with the cultures represented in their schools and frame how these differences might affect a child's school experiences. They can demonstrate their cultural awareness and acceptance through school events that feature different cultures. School personnel should welcome all parents enthusiastically.

Have some parents had negative experiences with schooling?

Barrier: Parents may not feel welcome at school.

Solution: Administrators need to provide all school staff with inservice training that emphasizes the importance of making all parents feel welcome. Staff members should understand that all parents should be treated as equals.

Barrier: Parents who have had unsuccessful or stressful school experiences may feel uncomfortable interacting with personnel in their children's school.

Solution: This is another situation where it is critical that all personnel help all parents feel welcome at school. Teachers and administrators can help parents see that school can be a positive experience. When parents are involved positively from the very beginning, rather than being involved only when there are problems, these negative feelings will dissipate.

Barrier: Parents who have not finished school may feel uncomfortable about entering the school setting.

Solution: Provide information to all parents on GED requirements or ESL information or reading literacy opportunities. If parents need help with their own educational goals, see if you can find other parents to help as well.

Do available resources make it difficult for parents to be actively involved?

Barrier: Some families are under acute economic stress; their basic needs take precedence over involvement in their children's education.

Solution: Provide information to all parents about community resources and services. Parent volunteers can help by compiling a directory of these services, such as legal and social services. After basic needs are met, educational needs can be addressed.

Barrier: When both parents work outside the home, they may have difficulty attending school events that are held during the workday.

Solution: Make sure school events are scheduled at a variety of times, so that all parents have an opportunity to attend.
Barrier: Parents' child-care responsibilities may prevent them from participating in programs held at school.
Solution: Solicit parent volunteers to provide child-care at school, so that all parents can participate.
Barrier: Parents may lack transportation to participate in school activities, or parking may be a problem.
Solution: Where many parents are involved, the school may want to bus parents to evening events using regular bus routes. Schools should evaluate parking access and find ways to provide adequate parking.
Barrier: Many parents are raising their children alone. Financial and time limitations can make it difficult to be involved at school.
Solution: Again, providing child-care, making transportation arrangements, and providing resource and service information can help these parents. Carolyn Wanat alerts us that single parents consider parenting their responsibility, not the school's.[22] School personnel can provide information about services, but they should not feel the need to take over.
Barrier: Time limitations for both parents and teachers make it difficult to participate readily in parent involvement activities. A large percentage of employed parents feel they do not have enough time with their children. Teachers also have limited time. They are usually not provided time for parent involvement programs; they have to make time. Teachers' after-school time is limited; often they are parents themselves.
Solution: School personnel should consider financial and time constraints when enlisting parental help at home in educational activities. Administrators should find ways to make time for teachers' parent involvement programs.

These are some of the many barriers that may arise in trying to implement parent involvement programs. Educators need to evaluate their own school population and identify barriers that are specific to that population.

Cautions about Practicing Parent Involvement

Regardless of opinions about the severity, most people agree that public education does face problems. Naturally, there is disagreement about the causes of and solutions to these problems. However, many researchers, educators, and parents believe parent involvement in education may be part of the solution to some of the problems schools face. However, some care should be exercised in practicing parent involvement. One caution is that, in emphasizing the role of parents, we may de-emphasize the role of schools. Or, if we take to heart the admonition that schools have the primary responsibility to involve parents, we may de-emphasize the role of parents.

Another caution lies in justifying a decision regarding a parent involvement practice because of what research says. First, we need to be sure we actually know what the research

says. Second, we must recognize that research evidence is a starting point. It provides a framework for decision making. Finally, some research is preliminary or may have other limitations.

Numerous advantages have been attributed to parent involvement in education, including increased student achievement, parent empowerment, improved attendance, and reduced dropout rates. An investigation of the research in previous chapters of this book confirms some of these advantages. For example, surveys indicate that teachers, parents, and children feel good when parents are involved. Research also indicates that there is a substantial discrepancy between beliefs and practices. Fortunately, this gap is gradually narrowing.

Another caution is that methodological shortcomings and the preliminary nature of some parent involvement research make it difficult to draw absolute conclusions about the nature and strength of the relationship between parent involvement and achievement. Much of the parent involvement research is correlational, and, while findings from correlational research are important, additional, well-controlled, replicated, experimental studies are needed. Controlled experimental studies, which permit stronger conclusions about cause and effect, are scarce in this area.[23] Kelly Powell-Smith, for example, investigating the effectiveness of parent tutoring in reading, found only 18 controlled experimental studies.[24] Of these, only nine were of acceptable quality. Particularly lacking are controlled studies that isolate components of parent involvement. Recommendations could be substantially strengthened by knowing which aspects of parent involvement are most likely to influence achievement in particular academic areas. Also lacking are cost benefit studies, which would help educators and parents determine costs in time and money.

Jean Ann Linney reminds us that " . . . efforts to relate parent participation to student achievement are limited by a multitude of intervening and mediating variables (e.g., the student's ability, the teacher's teaching skills, the age and emotional history of the child, and school community relations)."[25] Partly because of the complexity of the subject and partly because of the nature of research, there are still unanswered questions about the effectiveness of parent involvement in education. For example, there are mixed findings regarding how parent involvement in school governance affects achievement.[26]

While numerous studies show a correlation between parent involvement and student achievement, they do not tell us if parent involvement causes increased student achievement or if parents become more involved because their children are doing well. In her study of how school-to-home communications influence parent beliefs and perceptions, Carole Ames suggests that the positive relationship between parents' perceptions and their involvement may be due to the fact " . . . that children who are interested in learning actually engage or involve their parents more."[27]

Until recently, few researchers have investigated the specific parent involvement practices that are most likely to affect achievement and other variables.[28] However, more researchers have been trying to identify the types and processes of parent involvement that are most beneficial.[29] Effective forms of parent involvement at the middle, junior high, and high school levels need to be identified. Finally, research should be conducted that is of higher quality and is more focused.

Debbie's School Story

Debbie, a friend of ours, volunteered her feelings about school achievement and parent involvement. As you read the story, you will see that being involved in a child's education is a complicated issue. For example, how much Debbie wanted to get involved was affected by how well her son was doing. How her son did was affected by his attitude. His attitude was affected by what went on in the classroom.

In the sixth grade my son did quite well. He was on the honor roll two of the three trimesters. His attitude toward school was good, and he kept up on his assignments. Seventh grade was totally different. When I went to the first parent-teacher conference, I could not believe how many assignments he was missing. It took all of my patience and a lot of continual prompting to get him to do his work. His attitude was rotten and so was mine.

Because he was so negative about school, I found that I was also losing interest. Even though I tried to help him, I assumed he just was lazy and there wasn't much more that could be done, until one day when I heard some of his classmates talking about their teacher and how much they disliked him and some of the things he did. I decided I needed to check with the school. I called the counselor at the school and talked to him about the problem. He informed me that several parents had called and complained about the same problem.

This year my son is in the eighth grade and he is doing very well. I can tell he likes the teachers and feels that they care about him. Because he has a better attitude about his work and school, I find that I am more interested and want to help him more. I have found that when my son is interested in school the most is when he feels the teachers are truly interested in him and what he is doing. And, in conjunction with this, I find that when his attitude is good about school, then my attitude is also much better. I feel more like becoming involved in school work and activities. After raising three boys, I have been at both ends of the situation. It is much easier to become involved and help your children when the teachers care.[30]

Promises for Parent Involvement Practices

Parents, teachers, and principals all want what is best for children. All believe that parent involvement in education is one of those things that is good for children. Although research-based documentation is not as straightforward as many believe, there is consistent evidence that parent involvement in children's education is beneficial. Specifically, research suggests that parent involvement, particularly home-based involvement, can have positive effects on educators', parents', and students' behaviors and attitudes.[31] Research also suggests that there are small to moderate, but consistent, relationships between parent involvement and achievement. In fact, it appears that from 10% to 20% of the variance in achievement may be related to parent involvement.

We should note that we are more cautious in our conclusions than some other researchers and reviewers. We believe there is danger in overstating the relationship, as there is in understating the relationship. Expectations about parent involvement by both educators and parents should be realistic. Unrealistic expectations may lead to unfulfilled expectations. If parents do not have a sense of efficacy, and, we would surmise, if educators do not have a sense of efficacy, parent involvement practices will likely be ineffective.

As noted earlier, of the many aspects of parent involvement, parents' expectations for their children's educational success have the strongest relationship with achievement. This pervasive finding is supported by the research on parenting style. Authoritative parenting is typified by parents who are in firm control of their children, yet allow for psychological independence and are accepting of them. Authoritarian parenting, sometimes referred to as hostile parenting, is much more dictatorial, while permissive parenting consists of a hands-off, laissez-faire approach. By contrast, authoritative parents provide a supportive environment, are firm in their expectations, and allow independence. Researcher have found that, across ethnic groups, an authoritative style is associated with higher grades, and both permissive and authoritarian styles are associated with lower grades.

While setting high expectations is important, alone it is insufficient to affect achievement. Authoritarian parents typically set high expectations but are not responsive to their children's needs to meet these high expectations, whereas authoritative parents not only set high expectations, they also respond to their children's schooling needs in a democratic fashion, are supportive of school activities, provide a time and place for homework, encourage homework, and keep an open communication link with schools.[32]

One of the most critical things that schools can do is reach out to parents. While family characteristics influence children's achievement and school behaviors, the degree of parent involvement in education is much more dependent on teacher/school practices than on family characteristics.[33] Reaching out to parents can be something as simple as keeping them informed of the benefits of parent involvement. Sanford Dornbusch and Philip Ritter found a large increase in parent attendance at school events when a school newsletter informed parents that parent attendance at school events was associated with higher grades.[34] Results of a review by Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and Howard Sandler suggest that schools that do reach out to parents will have " . . . only limited success if they do not [also] address issues of parental role construction and parental sense of efficacy."[35] That is, parents must believe that they should be involved in their child's education, and they must believe that they are capable of having an impact.

Guidelines for Involving Parents

Larry Decker and his colleagues provide a thoughtful summary of factors that are critical to successful parent involvement programs:

- All parents have hopes and goals for their children, though they may differ in their support.
- The home is one of several spheres that influences a child.
- The parent is the primary contributor to a child's education. Schools must recognize a parent's role in a child's education.
- Parent involvement needs to be a legitimate part of education.
- Parent involvement requires a shared vision and a specific plan.

- Most barriers to parent involvement lie in schools' practices rather than in parents' attitudes.
- Any parent can be hard to reach. Parents must be approached on an individual basis.
- Successful parent involvement practices strengthen bonds between home and school, parent and educator, parent and child, and school and community.[36]

In conclusion, Ellen Lagemann reminds us, "Families educate: so do schools. They are related but different institutions and carry different expectations and responsibilities."[37] In addition, she points out that parent involvement is necessary, but not sufficient, to improve student achievement. If we believe that parent involvement can, " . . . in and of itself, transform student learning," as Michelle Fine says, then we exempt " . . . district and school policies and practices from accountability."[38] The potentially positive outcomes of involving parents in education cannot be viewed as the sole panacea for educational ills. Anne Henderson suggests that schools can become more productive if they involve parents, but only if they also do the rest of their job.

Rodney Ogawa advises that we must be careful to build bridges as well as buffers in the rush to make parent involvement an integral part of schools. We need bridges because " . . . schools are dependent on parents to provide resources that affect the academic performance of students."[39] We need buffers because parents may " . . . interfere with the professional discretion of teachers and principals." An ideal for parent-school relationships is one in which parents and teachers respect each other and work together for the benefit of children. Parents, teachers, and administrators all can have a positive effect on the children in their care.

Our primary purposes for writing this book were to investigate research exploring the relationship between parent involvement and student success in school, to consolidate the findings from this research, and to make recommendations for school teachers and administrators. These recommendations are summarized in chapters four, five and six, while information about the research is presented in the first three chapters. We hope the recommendations and information about the research are helpful to both educators and parents in planning, implementing, and evaluating parent involvement strategies.

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Parent Involvement In Education INSIGHTS AND APPLICATIONS FROM THE RESEARCH

SCOTT STEIN, MELANIE R., and RON J. THORKILDSEN

In this comprehensive review of parent involvement, authors Melanie Scott Stein and Ron Thorkildsen examine more than 200 studies to uncover what the research says about people's attitudes toward parent involvement, how they practice parent involvement, and how parent involvement affects student achievement. They identify research-based applications educators can use to implement effective parent involvement practices, discuss how schools can involve special populations of parents, and describe common barriers to involving parents and what schools can do.

[redacted] is a research assistant for the Bureau of Research Services, College of Education, Utah State University. She holds a master's degree in instructional technology from Utah State University. Her area of interest is the application of educational research to practice.

[redacted] is the associate dean for research and professor of instructional technology and special education, College of Education, Utah State University. His research and teaching interests involve the appropriate use of technology in education and the practical application of research in the public schools.

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